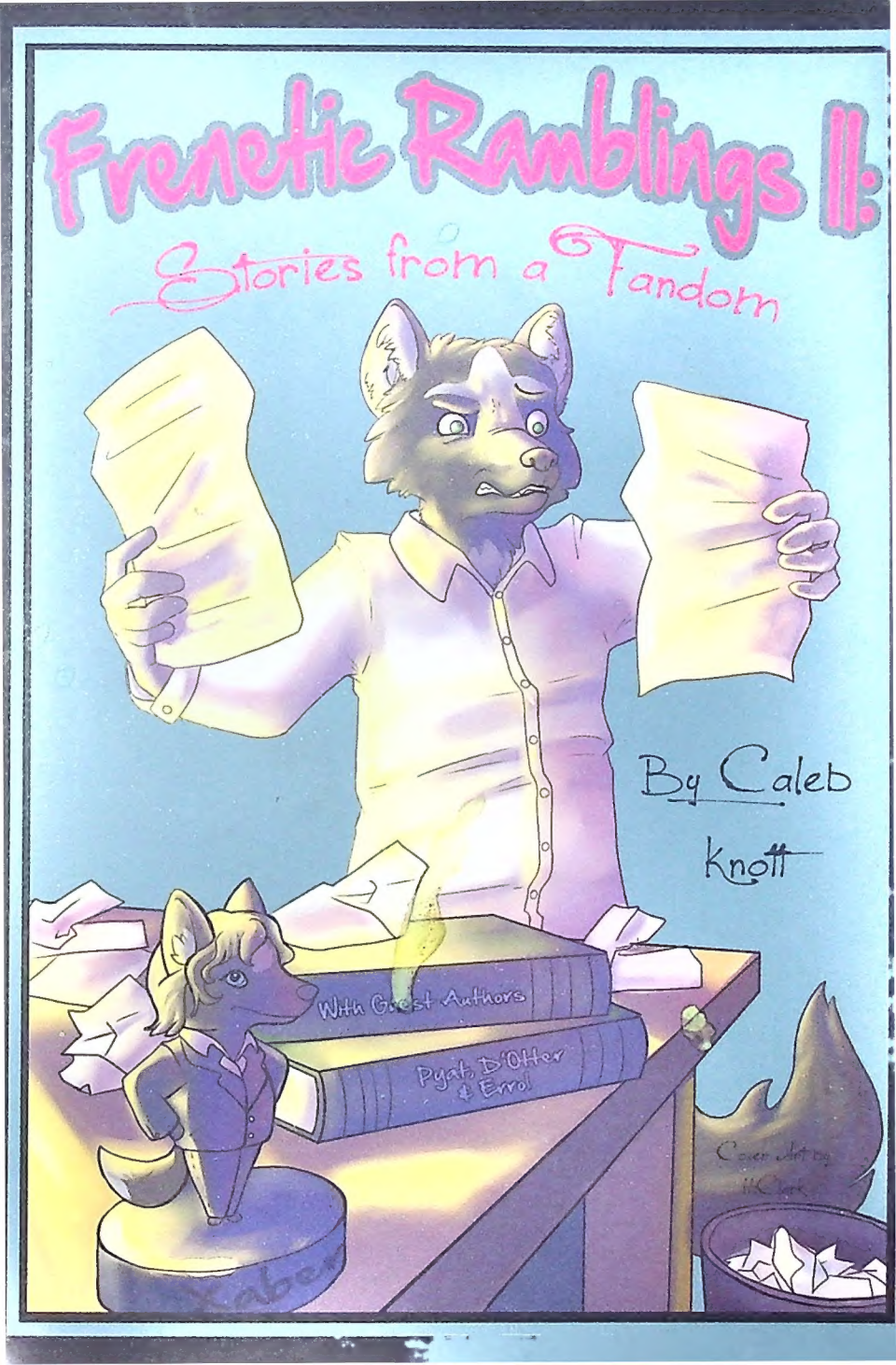
Frenetic Ramblings II:

Stories from a Fandom



FRENETIC RAMBLINGS II

Stories From A Fandom

Caleb Knott

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To my cherished readers,

Every time I sit down in front of the keyboard it's a new adventure. The characters take me on a trip and give me insight into things I have never even dreamed of before. When I write I try to look at the situation from the point of view of the character, in hopes that I will breathe life into him. This has always been one of my most important goals in writing. When that page of letters gets to you I want you to feel as though it's not a story but a moment in time you share in.

Inside this book we have compiled a collection of stories that is strongly based on the characters within them. Some stories can come and go and no matter who or what the prime character was, it would not change the outcome. Some characters are raving mad lunatics and others are compassionate souls. But all of them will leave you thinking of how that story could not be told without them.

I have many thanks for those that helped this book and all my writing make it your hands. My beautiful and talented wife of whom has spent countless hours not only editing and setting up the book but taking care of the things I cannot while I am writing. My friends, Matt and Matt, who have read my collective works and stand by me on my grand adventure. My Kids, without them I would not have taken up writing once again. It was them that inspired me to do what I want in life so that I may tell them to do what they love best and mean it.

I would also like to put out a special thanks to my three guest authors. When I asked if they would like to submit a story for print all three of them were tickled pink by the notion. I asked them out of respect for their talents and did not expect such exuberance from them in return. All three of them are men of great talent and deserve much praise. I hope that after reading their words that you are left with the feeling of awe that I was struck with.

And last but not least, you. Without readers I would just be mumbling to myself in a corner somewhere. The words of encouragement I receive from you remind me of why writing is

so rewarding. They are not just stories and entertainment that I've put onto paper but rather a message in a bottle. When the book is closed and unread it is not found and spends its time floating in a sea. But when you indulge me and glance within the pages I am heard. I hope that in my life I may inspire one person to take a chance and follow their heart, do what's right or even just tell a story of theirs and make someone's day.

Sincerely,

Caleb Knott.

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MAD THAD AND HIS CAPABLE CANINES

THE LETTER

The oversized black wolf snuck around in the shadows until he was ever so close to the mailbox. From just outside of the streetlight's view he prepared his drop off. A quick dash, followed by a stumble and a slapping of the metal box, was seen by nearly everyone in a hundred yard radius.

The wolf spun around in front of the box, placing a single digit to his muzzle, "Shhhhhhhhhh!"

He dropped the envelopes inside the box and dashed away snickering.

Mordecai was pulling the sleep from his eyes when the mail lady arrived that morning. He could see her pass by the front window from his prone position on the couch. It was how he normally woke up, unless he had been sleepwalking . . . in which case he would have awoken in his bed. He rolled off the couch and his knee landed in a bowl of soggy cereal and milk. It was funny how often this happened. He hated Crispy Crumpets cereal and he lived alone. Where did this stupid bowl of cereal come from? He pushed it aside, as usual, even though your average fox would be in a panic that someone had been in his home.

Opening the door, the mail lady looked back from the steps and saw him reach for his mailbox. She startled slightly and picked up the pace. He could see her mouth the words "filthy animal" as she hustled on to the next pristine property on the block. He lived in a nice neighbourhood with plenty of rich folks. He inherited the property from his foster parents and did not intend on moving anytime soon.

Grasping the letter he felt a wax seal. It had a paw print on it. The paw print was missing part of one its pads and was stylized with a lightning bolt and justice scales.

"What the hell?" he said out loud, as though the walls had ears.

He figured it must be some kind of gimmick from one ad agency or another, but decided to open it anyway. Inside was a note composed from cut-up newspaper.

"Wow, these guys went all out."

The letter read:

Dear Mordecai,

You have been selected to be a member of a special team, devoted to saving this fine city from a plague of inhuman acts! Meet me and the other members of the team Wednesday at Wharf 3 on Harbour St. near the old canning factory. 8:30 pm. Look around and you will see a sign on a door.

MT

"Yeah, right." Mordecai walked over to his phone and called his pal Happy Fox.

"Hello," came a cheery response on the line as expected

"Hey dude, did you send me this?"

"Send you what?" Happy Fox opened his mailbox at the other end of the line. "What the?"

"What the!?!. What?"

"Nothing, I just got some weird letter with a creepy seal."

"What the...?" spat Mordecai.

"I said I just got some weird letter with a creepy seal!"

"No, I am startled."

"Why? Cut the games, Mordecai. Did you send this?"

"No! That is why I called you, I got a letter too."

"Yeah, but you have not paid your taxes in months, so you should be getting letters," Happy wished Mordecai could see his goofy grin.

"No, I got a letter with a creepy seal too! Open it and read it!"

Happy Fox went silent and Mordecai could hear the tearing of the seal from the paper.

"What the?" came over the line.

"Exactly!" shouted Mordecai.

"So, you gonna' go?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not"

Why not? This sounds like someone is starting a vigilante group. It could be awesome!" Mordecai was exuberant.

"It could be highly illegal, that's why. Plus, don't you think my dad would kill me if I got involved with something like that?"

"No he wouldn't. He would probably be right there behind you, giving a hand, if he were invited."

"Oh, actually he is."

"What?"

"The note has a P.S. on it. It says, "Bring your dad." So I guess you need a ride?" Happy Fox was plenty aware that Mordecai had no car.

"See you at 8?"

"Yup, I'll go tell dad he's going to be a vigilante."

"You know, Happy, every time you drag me out on one of these escapades I wonder if you really are my son. It's bad enough you fell into that mystical pond and ended up like this, but now I have to follow you around while you fight crime." Mr. Dad looked down his nose at him as he parked the car.

"Admit it, dad, you love it." Happy Fox said with a sly grin on his snout.

"Yeah, like I love hugging cacti. Mordecai, wake up, we are here. Why don't you sleep at night like the rest of us?" Mr. Dad tossed his empty cup at the fox sleeping in the back seat.

The three got out of the car into the fog that stretched across the dock. Under the glow of a light was a door with the same symbol on it that the letter had. Mordecai looked at it and shook his head.

"Do you think this guy could make his hideout any more obvious?"

"Yeah, he could have put in neon," Mr. Dad pointed out the sign above the building to the others.

"You've got to be kidding. What are you guys doing here?" came a voice from behind the three. The trio just about jumped out of their respective skins.

"Holy crap! You scared the piss out of me Husky-o! Why do you always have to be sneaking up on me like that?" Happy fox was clutching his chest in jest, while Mr. Dad gave Mordecai a playful slap up the back of the head.

"Hey, what was that for? He's the one who startled you!"

"You're the hunting fox. Why didn't you hear him coming?"

"Ha Ha. It's Husky-o! He's far quieter than any deer I've ever hunted, and smells better too, I might add. What's that you're wearing?" Mordecai took a long sniff.

"C'mon guys, let's go! We're already late after having to wake up Rip Von Fox here."

As they approached the door they could hear a loud crash. When they pushed the door open the place was a mess of equipment and cars. It was like a storage locker gone bad. In the middle of it all lay a large black wolf, sprawled out on top of a broken table. Standing over him was a smallish white fox wearing a trench coat and round sunglasses, even though the room was as well lit as a second rate strip club in New Jersey.

With a sheepish grin the wolf looked up at the fox, "Best two out of three?"

He then leapt up to his feet-with a surprising amount of agility-and turned to the foursome that had entered at such an inconvenient time. The fox hardly took note. He looked around the room and then walked over to an old rusted out '59 Buick. The wolf climbed up onto the hood and into some better light. Everyone in the room immediately recognized him. As he counted on his fingers Mr. Dad turned and headed for the door.

"Where you going, John?"

"You're kidding right? C'mon Happy Fox, let's get out of here before he talks us into this." When Mr. Dad tried to open the door is was locked. "See? This is what I mean; who puts the lock on the inside of their door? Thadius, that's who. We already know he's nuts. Are any of you guys really willing to follow him into battle?"

"Yes," said Frostscar as he adjusted his round specs.

"Give me one good reason, fox face!"

"Well, how many times have you heard of a sane poor man becoming a super hero and saving a city? Never." The smug look on Frostscar's face was almost too much for the voice of reason to handle.

"Yeah, but Thadius is hardly rich, and I think it's the wrong kind of insane."

"AH HA! That's where you are wrong! I am rich! Filthy rich to be exact!" He took a sniff of his shirt to accent the point.

"You remember all those get rich schemes my buddy was involved in? One of them paid off. Not for him, but for me. I bet against him and ended up making out like a bandit raccoon in Twinkie factory! I'm loaded! And I figure what better way to give back to community then to clean up the streets of this city. The superheroes that are already here are overextending themselves. They don't have enough time to take on all of this city's crime and the police are corrupt. With the money and gadgets I have invented we could totally make the difference!"

Happy Fox began to put on the kit fox face that was so good at melting Mr. Dad's ability to reason away. Thadius began a march towards some lockers knowing victory was soon at hand.

"Okay, but I am out of here the *second* he pulls out spandex suits"

Thadius turned away from the locker immediately. "No, no... I was uh... thinking more of a leather type thing. Y'know, cool stuff. Like in the movie versions of old comic books."

"Well, let's see 'em." Mr.Dads skepticism was apparent.

"Uh... they're not ready yet... Uh, I was hoping for some input from you guys. Yeah, that's the ticket!"

The room was quiet, as they all knew that Thad was a bit insane at the best of times. But the feeling that something big was coming trounced any and all doubt they had of his intentions of making the world a better place.

A few weeks had passed since the group had first walked into the lair of the mad wolf. The intense training was beginning to show, and even Happy Fox's sister was beginning to comment on his slimming down and more fit appearance. The training seemed to almost never end, and Mr. Dad and Thad stood aside as the mysterious martial arts coaches that Thad brought in were training the boys.

"I still don't understand why you would pick Happy Fox for a project like this, Thad," Mr. Dad had frequently expressed concern over the last few weeks but stuck around at the enthusiastic requests of his son and his friends.

"Well, why *are* you still here then?" Thadius' slippery tongue was showing through his teeth and Mr. Dad knew he

was finally going to catch on to the reasoning behind those green eyes.

"Simple. As you know, kids, when told not to do something, are probably going to do it anyways. And despite my opinion on your sanity, I know that you have some kind of plan." Mr. Dad rubbed his chin and puffed on his massive Cuban cigar. "Now, if I did not come with him he would've come anyway and no matter what his choices are, I plan on sticking by him."

"So now you know why I invited him. Not only is it a two for one deal, but I think, and I believe you agree, that your son has something great inside of him. I personally would love to see what it is."

"That's good and all, but see, criminals have these things called guns? We are hardly real superheroes. I don't think there is much that you can do that will make us invulnerable to bullets."

Thad turned to Mr. Dad as he mixed up some protein shakes for his trainees and handed one to him. "Have you had one of these yet?"

"Yeah? Like, every time! They are beyond addictive. I'd like to know what all that crap you put in them is." Mr. Dad began to suck back his shake. "So?"

"So, what?"

"What about bullets?"

"John, this is not the first time I've ventured into creating superheroes, ya know," Thad was sporting a huge grin.

"What? Seriously? Like who?" Mr. Dad's disbelief was abundant.

"Like Terias. The only reason he's not here right now is because I would not build him increasingly more lethal weapons for the arsenal I'd set him up with."

"Terias? You've got to be kidding me!"

"No joke, he's doing awesome." Thad shook his head. "He's gone a little nuts with this vigilante thing rather than superhero like I wanted him to."

"Who is he?"

"Um... KnockOut."

"TERIAS IS KNOCKOUT?!?" Mr. Dad just about busted down a wall with the intensity of his astonishment. The whole room stopped until the masked trainers began to snap whips at the group of fledgling heroes. "That guy is responsible for more broken jaws in the ER than the entire UFC. Honestly, why the hell did you build him a giant rubber wolf fist cannon?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. Like I said he wanted more and more lethal weapons. When I wouldn't give them to him he grabbed my gear and left."

"Well, thanks to you, the ER is full of patients with his brand on them. And then there is that one incident of..."

"Let's not go there. Hey, I gotta go get some stuff ready for a mission tonight. Teenagers are great for this kind of thing. They love staying up all night already. Can you hand out the shakes? And don't get them mixed up. I make them custom to fit the athlete." Thad left before Mr. Dad could ask any more questions.

It was quiet, this high up. Mordecai sat and watched the entrance to MedInc Laboratories while Husky-o was drilling and mounting a plate to hold a camera.

"Do you think he's crazy?" Mordecai didn't take his eyes off the building while chatting it up."Who? Thad?"

"Yeah, Thad. What kind of guy gets a bunch of kids to run around and put up cameras all over the city? And of all the places one of them is a church? What's he afraid of? Someone stealing the crappy bread?"

"Dude, he's totally nuts. But to tell you the truth, I think he must have some kind of plan. I don't know what it is but I think I want to be here when it happens. Every day, Tower City reports an increase in crime. I think I'd rather be a part of the solution than just stand by and watch the place I love go down the sewer. Not to mention, the world spends a lot of time looking down on the transformed. I figure that if a few of us get out there and make a difference, it will give us all a leg up. Maybe we'll even get a little respect." Husky-o was bearing down with all his weight and grunting while the drill did its work.

"Does Shadow know that you are doing this?"

"Nope, and it's going to stay that way. He loves all this kind of stuff on paper but I think he'd worry himself sick if he knew that I was actually out here becoming a superhero. Man, I can't get used to saying that. Pass me the camera, will you?"

"Hmmmm, that's weird," Mordecai handed Husky-o the camera.

"Yeah, it is. His cameras are all like this."

"Not that. A van just pulled up. It's four in the morning."

"That is kinda weird. So why are you sticking around, if you think he's nuts too?" Husky-o sat back to take a moment's rest. Occasionally he could hear Thad and Mr. Dad on the intercom in his earpiece.

"Dude, we get to be vigilantes and have super weapons. Why wouldn't I want to be here? Plus he's paying us pretty good. Think about it-I could get a boring job at some crappy fast food place flipping burgers all day, making nearly nothing at all and having to get up early. Or, I could work for Thad, running around all night, kicking bad guy ass. Holy crap! Hahahahaha!"

"What's so funny?" Husky-o sat up and began to pan the camera down towards the entrance to MedInc Labratories.

"A pair of woodchucks dressed as nuns got out of the van, grabbed a guy out of the back and dragged him inside." Mordecai continued to chuckle.

"Holy crap, man! That's not funny. That's serious!"

"Uh . . . yeah, it's funny. Woodchucks in habits? Nunchuks? As in the chained weapon like Bruce 'I'll kick your ass' Lee?" Mordecai made Kung Fu noises and motions.

"Fox, that's retarded. As in, 'you are'." Husky-o reached up and touched the button on his earpiece. "You guys got a view on this place yet? Mordecai just saw some nuns bring some guy inside. I guess that explains why you had us put one of these on the church."

Mad Thad's voice came in clear, "Okay, guys, get back to main base."

"What? Shouldn't we try to get the guy out of there? We are superheroes, aren't we?" Mordecai was itching to get in there and start something.

"Nope, you guys are not ready for villains of this caliber yet."

"C'mon guys, head home. The wolf with the plan knows when it's too dangerous better than we do. So get back here, on the double." Mr. Dad's voice of authority cut them away from any ideas they had of rescuing the stranger.

"Alright, we're on our way.

It was a long week and Thad refused to discuss the Nunchucks (as they became known) any further. They tried to get him on the subject but he craftily avoided any real answers, until one day, when he called a meeting. They were all asked into a room with a big round table. They each had a spot with their names embroidered on the chair, and there were a few extras.

"Why a round table, Thad?" Mr.Dad asked with some inkling of a theory.

"I was originally going to base the team on the Knights of the Round Table, but by the time I decided that was dumb, I had already ordered it. Anyway, we have business to deal with." His seriousness was astounding them all. It was not something they were used to.

Thad stood up and paced. "I've been worried about this day. I could not hide all of it from you forever. It would be kind of pointless, really. Right now there is a horrible beast being created in MedInc Laboratories. He could be released at any minute and when that happens he will tear Tower City a

new one. Chances are dozens of people will be hurt or killed, and the cops won't even be able to stop it."

"What makes you think a bunch of guys like us can stop it, if it's so bad?" Frostscar almost choked on some ice water that was put out for him.

"Over the last few weeks I've been steadily giving you guys genetic aberration treatments. I was worried..." Thad didn't get to finish the sentence due to the air flow being cut off. Mr. Dad had leapt out of his seat and had him by the throat. He held the near three hundred pound wolf aloft by his neck with ease.

"You poisoned my son!" Mr. Dad was furious.

"*choke* *cough* *cough*"

"Dad! You're killing him! Look at his eyes!" Happy Fox was pulling desperately at Mr. Dad's arm trying get him to let go. When he did, Thad fell to the ground in a heap, grabbing his neck and coughing violently.

"You better explain yourself, wolf!"

"*cough* *cough*" He held his hand up to get a moment to catch his breath. "I feared you guys wouldn't do it if you knew what was in the shakes. But hear me out. Mr. Dad, do you think a couple of weeks ago you'd be able to pick me up like that? Didn't you notice your truck's springs on the drivers side sagging?"

Mr. Dad thought for a minute. "Y'know, I ended up bringing it in for service twice because of that. What's up with that?"

"Well, you've nearly tripled in weight. You've become super dense and could probably carry that truck over your head with ease.

Thad turned to Happy Fox. "Start running around the table, please."

Happy Fox began to sprint. It was blisteringly fast.

"Faster, please," Thad asked.

"Faster, please," he repeated.

"Faster, please," Thad said again, as Happy Fox ran even faster.

"Faster, please," Happy Fox's speed was so intense that the room was whipped into a veritable tornado. Anything that was not nailed down was caught in the torrent and began to slam into the heroes. The only one not budged by the velocity of the wind was Mr. Dad. Happy came to a stop with a huge grin on his muzzle that was clear to see despite his mess of fur.

"Dad! This is incredible! I don't think I care that he did this to me. It's freaking awesome!"

"I am glad you're happy about it but I am still not overly impressed with our gracious leader. What if something had gone wrong?" Mr.Dad stood with his arms crossed and glared at Thad.

"C'mon, I tested this stuff first. All the test mice are fine. The only one unaccounted for was the one that broke out of my lab through the concrete retaining wall." The room blinked in unison. "The rest of you are ready to go to. Mordecai is immune to, and has some control over electrical currents. I have a suit lined with tazers for him that will give him the nastiest hug you've ever seen. Husky-o can be so stealthy that he is virtually invisible. He is also super flexible, which makes him a master of escape and espionage. And last but not least, Frostscar. With some practice he will be able to read weakness

in his enemies and strike so precisely that they will be rendered paralyzed or even unconscious. All the powers I gave you came from your innate abilities. I just made them way better!"

The room was absolutely quiet. They were stunned at the revelation that Thad had made them honest to goodness super heroes. What this meant was still unclear in their minds. Thad walked over to his seat and sat down.

"So if you could do this to us, what stopped you from just making yourself like this and taking the city's problems on yourself?" Mordecai's insight shook the room.

Thad sat forward in his chair. "I just don't have what it takes to get the job done. Sure I can come up with these cool gadgets and alter genes, but when it comes down to it I am no real hero. But you guys . . . " he looked around the room. "you guys have something special. You're idealists and strong willed. Over the years, you've shown courage and compassion amidst a world filled with terrible people. Inside of each of you is a real hero waiting for the opportunity to show himself. If I'd been wrong about you, you would not have stuck around. Not a single one of you left. Nobody here knew that I would actually give you super powers and you were all willing to give my ideals a shot anyways. You didn't just get up and leave. Instead you are all standing here ready to show the world what you're made of. That's what makes a real hero."

Thad placed his hand on a button on the desk. He took a deep breath and pushed it. Doors slide up behind each of their chairs. In the lockers there were suits made of armour with MTA marked on them. With the exception of the logo, the suits were plain black.

"Out there is a monster, created by an even bigger monster. He will kill without prejudice-women and children, fathers and sons, rich and poor-alike. He will stop at *nothing* to mold this world in his image. The only thing standing in his

way is time, unless someone steps up to the plate. Is there anyone in this room that is willing to walk away from this fight?" No one said a word.

"Then you'd better suit up. Because the ring announcer has just asked the audience to stand for the national anthem and this fight is for the belt."

Mordecai leapt up onto the table. "Well? What are we waiting for? Let's do it!"

Will Thad's fledgling heroes make the difference he hopes? Will Mr. Dad forgive him for not telling them his plan earlier? Will Mordecai get out of bed in time for the action to begin? Follow the further adventures of Mad Thad and His Capable Canines online at www.effinghamproductions.com starting this April 2012.

ON ANY SUNNY SUNDAY

This was a story commissioned by RaverFox.

The sun was bright on this beautifully clear Sunday afternoon. Normally I would not even think about working a Sunday but with the increase in attacks they upped the number of patrols to be made by nearly three hundred percent. The other pilots are beginning to complain but I am loving the extra seat time.There is not much in this world that is like piloting a 160-ton robot vehicle. Yeah that's right, one hundred and sixty tons. Mine was big. Heavy armour and more weapons than almost any other mech on the face of the earth. And I am proud to have been chosen to drive her. At first they called her the Behemoth. I changed her name to Lucy. A lot of fellows say it's dumb but I like the idea of the opposition going home to tell everyone that Lucy took them down. So what if I am bit cocky, I deserve this job.

Climbing the ladder I could feel the warmth of the sun on the rungs. It was going to be one of those days where you could not hide on the plains because visibility was so good. RADAR was useful but having a good visual brought a lot to the fight.

My senses tingled as the machine's vibrations fade and smooth out. The twin turbines that power her were almost flawless. Only on startup was the rumble noticeable in the cockpit. It was like driving a Lincoln, you could not even hear her motor once it was going.

I strode out from under the canopy and into the field. The sun had just crested the horizon half an hour ago and was already blazing hot. You could see the heat on the field but the cities in the distance were still crystal clear. Not a sign of movement and that was nice. It was our job to protect them from the sinister forces that wished to swallow them up for the resources they provided. This field did not provide crops in the normal sense. They were fields of solar collection grids. They provided power for our nation. We use them to convert seawater into hydrogen and oxygen for use in our vehicles and processing plants.

The only thing more valuable is water itself. Some us transformed species need very little water but we are not the majority. So as of late we have been seeing a bit of a rise in dissention. A few rabbits last week pulled a stunt and got someone's mech caught up in some steel cable. The wolf piloting was furious that bunch of rabbits left him high and dry in the desert. They left signs in the field that said, "No water for us? No water for wolf."

I could see the sign ahead of me; I felt it was in need of a good stomping. The sign is now a pile of splinters.

I thought I would see anything coming before the RADAR did on a day like today, but I was wrong. Several shots bounced of my windscreen. I was lucky the mech that fired them was too small to house any really big guns or I'd be in real trouble. I began to chase him. My heart started to pound and my paws grew sweaty. The only flaw in this huge mech was the air conditioning. It was a little weak.

As I got a little closer I could see it was indeed the enemy from the south. They often picked off lone mechs out on patrol but not this time. I pulled the trigger on my 45 mm cannon, nothing happened. When I pulled the trigger again there was an explosion in my storage bay. Sabotage, those filthy little buggers, albeit small the resistance within our own ranks was beginning to have an impact. Now that I think about it, perhaps the mechs that have been taken down on patrol have been weakened the same way as I have.

My mech shut down and I was sitting there like a big fat target waiting for that little tiny mech to catch on that I was dead in the water. Time to show them why I was chosen for this job. I leapt out of the cockpit with a flare gun and side arm and hid behind the leg of the mech. When they turned around and began coming towards me they did not even notice. It was hard to stop my tail from twitching every time they took a step closer.

Once they were close enough I took the sprint into their blind spot and hoped they would not see me ,or their anti-personnel systems would turn me to paste. I was lucky this time and they did not. I crushed the flare guns barrel so I could jam it into the cooling vent at the hip of the mech. Once it was in there I fired.

It was not long before the temperature sensor was fooled into thinking the mech was running too hot and shut down the engine.

They just sat there. I waited a good five minutes hoping they would come out to see what the problem was, but they didn't. I began to climb the mech as quietly as I could. Occasionally, a claw would scratch out the subtlest of sounds and nearly give me away. I was right on top. I could see the pilot: he was trying everything to get the mech to restart. He was oddly comfortable and must have been aware of the sabotage or he would be panicking and worrying that I could start back up at any minute too.

It was split second decision to grab the latch and fling it open. He was shocked to say the least. Once the shot rang out his shock was gone. When I searched his body I found a few numbers and info on his contacts. As I said there was a reason they gave me this job.

LETTERS HOME

This story was written for Condition: Furry, a convention held in London, Ontario, Canada. It is a non-canon story set in the conventions universe of Four Points.

Hi Mom,

Sorry it has been so long since in have sent you anything. We just finished our final exam and it seems I am being sent off to Four Points next week. Can you believe it? I have been chosen to help with the work at HQ. Normally this would be an honour, and I still think it is, but I am scared as hell. Word has it that the Feral Extremists have been pushing hard from the south for some reason. Cajun is worried that they know something we don't.

I am hoping that I get into Cola's clan, but that is pretty much the dream of fifty percent of the guy's here. The rest of them want in on the Spirit Drinkers action. Someone was passing a rumour around that Eric Drakenfur from up the road was leading part of the defense campaign under his excellencies' Frostscar's subcommand. If that's true, Linda's husband has really made it somewhere in all this filth. I know Bobby doesn't really get along with Tom and fights a lot with him at school but if this is true he could end up being the son of my commanding officer. So tell Bobby not to rough up Tom too badly in the schoolyard or his dad may have a few toilets for me to clean.

The other day we learned how the system crash has changed the way we fight. It used to be so easy for us just to send guided missiles and the like in to soften things up. But since the emp blast destroyed most of everyone's electronics it seems that the generals had to relearn strategies dating way back to some of the greatest wars of all time. They already studied these battles but never with the thought that trench warfare would ever rise up and take over the battlefields again. There is not enough tech left to spare. I think this is what scares me the most. The death toll is going to be huge unless we can quell the Feral Extremists fast.

How is dad doing? I've been stressing a bit since you told me about the dementia. Do you think he may get dangerous if he flashes back to his days in the war? I know you don't want to hear this but maybe we should start thinking about a home. I just think that with how vicious his reputation was he could

do some real harm if he doesn't know who you are all of a sudden.

Sorry if I have you worried but it's hard to tell the guy next to you that you just shit your pants when they gave you your location. Keep sending your letters the same way. They find us by our serial number.

I love you, Mom, and give Bobby a hug for me. I know it's been hard on everyone but I think if we don't fight here it may come closer to home than we want it too.

Pvt. William Surefoot

Hello Willy,

You're father is fine for now, but I am afraid you are right. I was terrified the other night. He got up in the middle of the night and walked out of the house screaming at someone who wasn't there. I think, or at least hope, he was sleep walking. He yelled, "Come and get me, you ursine bastard!" and then rolled our Buick.

I have never seen him like this and I have only heard stories. So I went to the veteran's hospital and registered him. They are taking him next week. Your brother won't talk to me. But at the same time I found him shaking under the covers when your father was out there the other night.

I am not going to lie to you, the fact that you are going to Four Points scares me too. But your father is brimming with pride. When he is cognizant he spends all his time telling his buddies that you are the pick of the litter. So stand up tall and be proud even when terrified. I have confidence that you, like your father, will make it through this.

Bobby got into another fight at school yesterday. Some pups were yelling anti-war propaganda and he mauled one of them pretty badly. The good thing that came out of this is that

he and Tom actually talked to each other without throwing fists. So I don't think you have to worry about any toilets giving you reflections in the future.

I love you son, come home safe.

Mom

Hi Mom,

I arrived at Four Points yesterday. It seems that dad's reputation has landed me here. It also turns out that Eric Drakenfur has requested me on his team. I guess the good part of all of this is that I have some of the most experienced frontline troops in the corps working besides me. I can't tell you where or when we are going but it seems we are indeed headed out. The Ferals have destroyed some major defense system and have gained ground. This is the first time since all this began that we have lost any territory. There is something different about the way they are fighting. There is a ferocity unlike ever before.

I was welcomed here like a hero even though I haven't done anything yet. I hope their expectations are not too high. At the moment I feel like an imposter, but the troops see me as the prodigal son of Sergeant Surefoot. Frostscar himself came to thank me for enlisting. I don't think I have ever met someone with that kind of charisma. For twenty minutes after he left my whole platoon bubbled with excitement instead of terror at the task at hand. No wonder the troops here hold him with such regard.

I think we will be alright. Once again give Bobby a hug for me (if he'll let you) and tell Dad that I will keep his good name intact.

Love Pvt. William Surefoot

My dearest Will,

I hoped it would not come to this, but we had to admit your father into the Veterans Hospital today. Last night before bed he almost killed Bobby. If you boys were not built so sturdy he very well may have. He grabbed him and accused him of killing Franky. It has been years since I have heard the story, but Franky was one of his platoon mates. He was killed by mortar fire just before his tour was up.

So this morning Linda and I drove him to St. Pat's (our car is still wrecked). It's okay though, later when we told him what happened he agreed it was for the best. I guess that is one of the things that made your father a great leader. He always takes responsibility for his actions. I am very sorry you could not be here for all of this. However, when I read your father your last letter he gained a look in his eye unlike any I have seen in a long time.

Sorry I have to keep this one short sweetie but I have to take you brother to his hockey practice and just wanted to make sure you knew what was going on.

Love you very much,

Mom.

Five weeks later:

Dear Mrs. Surefoot.

We regretfully inform you that your son Pvt. William Surefoot has gone missing in action. He was last seen in a classified area with his platoon. We have hopes that he will either be returned to us as a POW or turn up when we return to that field of battle.

We will keep you posted.

Cpl. P. Rutherfur, Corps correspondent

Four weeks later:

Hi Mom,

You can breathe easy now. They told me that you received the MIA letter a few weeks ago. I am sorry that you had to get that. I have a few things to tell you about, but I think first off you should know that Eric Drakenfur was killed in the POW camp. He gave himself up selflessly to save me from his very own fate. He said I had to make it out so the troops morale would survive that much longer.

We managed to fight the Ferals back to the original line of demarcation. It was a grand victory. Rumour has it that I made it into the records as a hero. I am to receive three medals in a ceremony next week. One of them is a purple heart. I was badly injured when we were taken in the southern town of Fernbrook, and then again when they found me.

Commander Drakenfur and our platoon pushed into the city at daybreak only to find that most of the civilians were cleared out and many of the buildings were reduced to rubble. We could not get past most of it with our tanks and we found out in a bad way that this was what the Ferals had in mind. Louie, one of our scouts, got caught up in the kill zone early in the battle and that's when I realized this all sounded familiar from the stories dad told me. I began to bust my way from building to building through the dividing walls. We managed to get in between two of their platoons and they ended up causing a huge amount of casualties to their own side once we opened fire on them from the middle of the field.

We thought this was going to stop them from returning fire from our left but instead we found out that the Ferals are completely mad. Instead of avoiding it, they shelled their own troops along with us. When we moved back into the building

and began our push again we came across booby trap after booby trap. It was a nightmare. Every step you took could have been your last.

I saw an opening in the fire zone and did not wait. Needless to say it made Com. Drakenfur pretty mad. I managed to get myself in a bit of bind but destroyed the enemy's ability to return fire. There was a small bunker filled with something called PTGAS canisters. If I had not made that run we would all have been killed when they released it. As I smashed the release mechanism Com. Drakenfur came in behind me and pulled me out by the scruff of my neck and down behind an old wall.

He saved my life for the first time that moment. The explosion was massive and that was the last thing I remember about that battle. When I woke up I was in a cell with 6 others including Eric. At this point we were all equal in the eyes of the enemy. I had been asleep for a week and a half. He told me that there were fifteen of us captured.

Mom, please do not read this part to Bobby. Edit it for him.

When I asked him where the rest of them were, Eric pointed out the butchers block on the other side of hell. The Ferals were truly mad. Apparently, this segment of their army was run by Dr.Vitor Bluefur. We were all to be guinea pigs for his experiments. He performed them in the open for us to watch. Once the experiment was over, Dr.Vitor would eat the victim. For the next week I watched mate after mate slaughtered in the most horrible ways imaginable. The most terrifying part was they made us decide who was next. It eventually came down to Eric and I, and he went. But before he went, he started a fight with the guards. He managed to knock one of them back into the cage where I held him. Eric was shot in the guts but managed to fight the other guard and won. He was amazing.

After the fight Eric dropped. I was then filled with rage and crushed the guard with my bare hands. I guess the apple did not fall far from the tree. I got his keys and tore my way out of the camp just in time to see our troops pushing their way into the valley just outside Rankin. It's a small town west of the line of scrimmage. They were getting hammered from artillery in the hills of this camp.

I could barely walk but, filled with adrenaline and rage, I somehow ran through the camp to the surprise of many and into field guns. It was all luck and I feel kinda of weird with all the attention it brought me, but I fought a Feral and took a solitary grenade from his corpse. That was all it took to send the ammo dump sky high.

They have been picking shrapnel out of my back and legs ever since I got back. I am called a hero, but it is Eric that deserves credit for saving my ass and making it all possible. Tell Tom how much of a hero his dad was and that we would not have been able to defend Four Points without him. His decisions rallied the troops and Frostscar has all but made a holiday out of respect for him.

At this point you should be expecting me home due to my injuries. But I am not letting Dr. Vitor get away that day. Rumour has it that he was heading west, towards Cranston. I cannot rest. I have friends that need some closure. I am going to find him. I made a promise to Eric.

When he chose to go instead of me, the last thing he said was make sure Tom is taken care of. The best way I can do that is to make sure this war ends.

I love you Mom.

I'll be home soon.

A FERAL B-MOVIE

This was written for Camp Feral the 13th, summer of 2011, and appeared in the conventions con-book.

"The Canadian armed forces have reported that the disturbance reported to them by the Algonquin parks police is a very dangerous one. A large vat of candy ooze at the local Fudgy Bar factory has spilt over its rim and into the lab where they are in the process of developing a new tasty treat for the masses. George Lugenfur, a lab technician, has gone missing. The large blob has been seen heading for the park and any and all visitor are being advised to..."

"CUT! Who the hell has a bloody radio on?" The director was furious. This was the third stoppage in production today. The first two were because of cell phones and now this.

"But sir! There is an emergency and we are being asked by the army to..."

"Listen here, fuzzball! I don't care if your cousin is Chuckles the Fox! If you interrupt filming again I am going to cast a new sidekick! So, tell me now. Are you going to shut off your blasted radio or take it with you when you leave my set?"

"Okay, sorry." Vincent was the second biggest name on this film set and the only thing that set him apart from the rest of the world was his famous last name. His cousin was, as mentioned, Chuckles the Fox, one half of the famous Fox Bros. comedy duo. His cousin had recently passed from a tragic case of irony - he was crushed by a billboard with his own picture on it - so Vincent hoped he could cash in on his fame and make a name for himself before the body even cooled.

"Okay crew, this is our last chance to hit this scene! Now let's get it right! ACTION!" The cast and puppeteers began moving the huge mechanical monster's limbs in a random manor. There was no sense to how or why this would be happening in the movie but the director thought it looked great. In reality, when the film comes out, it will be the biggest laugh it gets. Even the average moviegoer will recognize a good portion of the monster from the Macy's parade fiasco a year earlier. The only difference being the multitude of discarded bagpipes from the failed Angus Bagpipes and Beef factory that were stapled to it.

The noise this horrendous contraption made was terrific in every way but one (that being good). It barely drowned out the sound of dogs barking and search helicopters from the scene. When one of the interns leaned over to the director and pointed out the dogs he shooed him away. "Don't you think dogs would be barking and there would be helicopters in the air if this were actually going on?"

The sound of barking faded away and the director got his shot. "Okay folks, that's a wrap for tonight. I want everyone here nice and early tomorrow. We are going to film the rescue scene and we need everyone bright eyed and bushy tailed!"

As he began to turn away Vincent spoke up once again. "Sir, what about the state of emer..."

"Vincent, if you bring that up again, you will be sleeping out here with the monster. You got that?"

"Yes sir," Vincent hoped that the director indeed knew what he was doing. He'd sunk a pile of his own money into this venture. The director was hired because when he was a cub he had been in the same pack as the producer. The producer took the job on because he loves money and knew his pack mate would work for pennies on the dollar. Fact was, this was a vanity pic for the hero. Vincent bought his way into it, but with his overbearing status and fame he controlled the set.

Vincent padded to his tent ever so slowly that night. Silence was his best bet for survival. He was big for a fox,- but nothing compared to the size of Major Mandible Ursin, the star of this film. He was the stereotype of b-movie action flicks. He funded the majority of his films with money made from a huge chain of plastic surgery centers specializing in the Douglas/Campbell procedure. He was not only owner of this crazy mass marketed plastic surgery corporation, his very own jaw carried the girth of a creature far greater in size than any known bear.

He slept lightly that night. Occasionally, searchlights would flash across his cabin windows and the sound of the director's voice could be heard cursing out in his sleep. He was truly mad and once again Vincent found himself hoping the director knew what he was doing.

It was still dark when the pounding came. His door was nearly busted down by the force of the blows. It bowed out in the middle with every heavy thump. Three times it hit. Then waited. Vincent backed into the corner. He was terrified stiff. His fur stood out at all angles and his pajamas began to tingle with static electricity as his body shook. The handle turned and the door was flung open to the point of crashing into the small desk behind it.

"Come on, chum! The director wants to film this scene during the golden hour! I'm telling yah, I gotta good feeling about this flick, kid! I can see you do too! You're positively sparkling! Let's rock this scene!" The jaw support system swung its massive frame out from his doorway and strutted away.

When Vincent's muscles let loose and he sunk into the corner it created a nearly inflammatory explosion of sparks. Results? The scent of singed fur would forever remind him to use more fabric softener in his PJs. He was now fully awake and wired for sound. In no way, shape or form did coffee even come close to that wake up.

The set was already prepped when he got there. Most of the cast and crew still suffered from flat spots in their fur that turned the set into a bed head fashion show. When the cast itself was noted on having some very severe cases of pillowcases indentus, the director told them to stop grooming. It seemed that he felt it was more realistic. Who would have time to groom in a time like this? You should be far too busy trying to save your tail from the undulating mass of pipes and udders.

Everyone took their posts. The director had two hard mounted old school film cameras and a couple of newer digital

handhelds. Vincent waded into the water next to the monster. He was dressed in a poorly mocked military uniform that was worn for nearly every one of the producers past films. The puppeteers, mostly college student and action film fanboys, would literally be responsible for his life as the monsters arms were heavy enough to pin him under the water if anything went wrong.

The big arm wrapped around Vincent. A nervous shudder ran through his body. He looked up and the director screamed, "Action!"

His eyes peered past the director to see a gelatinous amoeba of elephantine proportions. Inside it rode the missing lab technician. When his eyes met Vincent's all he did was shrug his shoulders. Vincent began to scream. It was a scene that would make him famous. Pure terror for the second time in less than an hour ripped any and all sensibilities from him. He began clawing like he was mad and that's when Major Mandible Ursin charged in for the rescue.

In spectacular ignorance he dove for the mechanical menace he knew and unwittingly dodged the sour cherry flavoured death slug. He pulled at the arm just as the puppeteers saw the monster and fled. It was above and beyond any possible scene that was scripted the night before last. Vincent lept up and fled before the arms of that magnificent bastard could wrap around him for the hug written into that scene.

"Hey chum! Where yah going?" Major Mandible Ursin turned to see the true action at hand. He began to scream like a sausage whistling in the microwave. The blob oozed over him and the last thing to be seen from him was his cleft as it filled in with the delicious concoction.

The appearance of the helicopter was too late to catch the absorption. The pilot was receiving info on what to do once he found the blob. Apparently the blob guided itself with

magnetism and a high iron content. Probably why it was after the monstrosity that was created for this film. The pilot then fired a single emp bomb. It was designed for shutting down and destroying enemy electronics and there was hope it would scramble whatever brains the blob had.

When it hit, it was a beautiful display of sparks and colour. The director leapt for joy as perhaps the best scene he had ever filmed was all but wiped from the records. The two film cameras were spared and thankfully for that, it made movie history. The Producer broke records for the lowest budget blockbuster. The sticky but breathing hero received recognition as a genuine action hero for the first time. Vincent even won an Oscar for his realistic portrayal of fear. Unfortunately, he could not attend the red carpet gala. He was busy having dinner with all four president Rosenfurs that resided at Fernbrook Sanitarium.

WOLF RUN

The lean-to was dripping with dew in the early morning. In most cases the pair of wolves below it would still be slumbering and enjoying a lazy morning, but on this fine morning they were too close to civilization, if it could really be called that, to sleep much longer. Slip yawned in an exaggerated manner fitting an operatic lion. He was a fit black wolf of the most spry type, fast on his feet and agile enough to embarrass many circus performers.

His companion in his travels used to be a very well known mage. He decided to escape the limelight and work for himself a few years earlier. He was stark white and provided quite the contrast from Slip's inky black fur. Most would think that a mage of his caliber would remove the spell that gave him the canine features which he now sported, but after a short time he realized his love for the shape and allowed it to settle in as his permanent prominent feature. At first it was simply a disguise and in many instances an inconvenient one at that. But a feeling of comfort overrode any and all desires to ever wear a human skin again.

"I don't think that laying here any longer is going to do us any good. Particularly when the towns hunters come out for their morning romp," Spark rolled away from his companion. "I know it's cold sometimes, but it really messes with my fur when you smother me at night."

Spark knew of Slip's affection for him but never let on. They had been traveling together for more than a year now and, despite his true nature Spark was developing feelings for Slip. His life as a human was one filled with tragedy. He lost his wife and children in a battle that spilled from the battlefield and into his town. He did overcome his enemies but the loss was so great that he left the town feeling shamed. He changed into what he is now, and hid from those that would have actually praised him for his actions. He did not care that he saved them from the onslaught of demonic forces; the losses he suffered were just too much for him to bear.

"It was far too cold last night and I know how much your back bothers you after a night on the ground like that." Slip

reached out and brushed the fur on Spark's muzzle. "I don't know why you don't just cast us up a nice place that is cozy to stay in overnight."

"You know as well as I do that if anyone saw a monstrosity of a castle pop up for even just one night that the king would have wizard hunters out here faster than a snail in a slingshot."

"Snail in a slingshot?" Slip howled at the ridiculous idea.

"I was grabbing at straws for a metaphor, okay?"

"Shhhhhhh," Slip's ears perked.

"What is it?" Sparks crouched and pulled the tarp off the lean-to.

"Hunters are out early. We gotta move, unless we are going to head into town?"

"You want to?" Spark tilted his head as Slip let a smile poke through his jet black lips.

The black wolf stood up straight and called out. "Hunters! Stay your bows! We are sentients from the southern lands seeking supplies and wishing to do some trade in your market."

Mumbling and swords being pulled from sheaths could be heard. Slip looked over at Spark with a worried look. It has been a while since they had to fight. For the most part when they were diplomatic and mentioned trade most villages and towns would welcome them despite their species. Trade from the southern lands was far more valuable to them then the feeling of discomfort that rose from having non-humans amongst them.

"I've found them!" A large town guard came through the trees. He held his sword out in front of him. He was shaking slightly and the two wolves could smell sweat and fear. This

was never a good sign. Fear elicited a response that was often rash and uncontrolled.

"We are here for trade and not a fight, good sir." Spark was the talker most of the time. Both he and Slip stood nearly six feet tall and were truly a fearsome sight to behold. They were very dependent on eloquent speech to prevent themselves from encountering too many battles and raising notice.

"We'll see about that then, won't we?" The guard stammered out.

"Lewis, put your sword down. These are clearly not the soul thieves we are searching for." A nobleman came through the trees behind the guard and put his hand on the sword and pushed it down. "If they were, they would not be speaking with us. I am sorry uh... wolves? But we are on the hunt for a soul thief or maybe two."

"Ah, understandable. Perhaps then a guide to the town could be offered to us since it seems you must be on some form of alert and it may be dangerous for us... Lupines to approach."

The knight that stood before them was very kind and wise. Despite the racial characteristics that stood before him he dealt a fair hand and took the situation in stride.

"What exactly are you if I you don't mind me asking." Members of Slip's race were few and far between in the northern states. Yes, were-creatures were known but none could speak or muster a calm demeanor. It was far easier for the two wolves to make a claim of being cursed by a "Wizard" then to tell of Slip's people, which was far less believable to most common men.

"We are cursed folk. A wizard that has been slain cast this spell on us and we are on a trek to reclaim our humanity in the eyes of our king so that we may return to our land without fear of persecution."

"Ah, you poor souls." This statement made the two cringe on the inside. They very much loved their canine bodies and felt demeaned but let it slide in preference of diplomacy. "Well then, come with us and we shall return to town and take care of your needs."

The town's market impressed Spark as they passed through on their way to the nights homestead. If was rather large for the size of town and indicated to Slip that there must be some wealth gathered amongst these people. It was a peculiar sight to see, nearly every stall had a poster advertising the loss of a child and a reward for finding them.

"Good sir, what was this about a soul thief you were in search of?" Spark's curiosity had been perked.

"Ah, no doubt you have noticed the missing child posters. You see for nearly a year the children of this town have been disappearing. We suspected nothing at first. Perhaps wolves or... uh you are probably aware of the first thoughts we would have. But, eventually we noticed that for it to be animals that they would have to be coming too far into the town for them to hunt. Someone would have seen the culprits."

The Knight stopped and looked briefly at a poster and turned to the shopkeeper. "Charles, your son too?"

The shopkeeper looked up and the bags under his eyes were packed and ready for a long trip. He had clearly not slept.

"Yes sir, yesterday." He wiped his eyes. "Please sir, we must find these culprits."

"We are doing all we can. I promise justice will be served." He reached out and held the sobbing man's hand. "Stay strong, Charles, there may be hope yet."

He let go of his hand and continued on his way. The wolves followed and both knew that the knight before them was a compassionate caring man. It was a rare situation in a world that was often cruel and unyielding in its ways. Spark

was all too aware of the lands unreasonable laws. Since the crowning of King Larson, wizards have been hunted regardless of past services to the monarchy. The King feared the power they wielded because he himself was one of the folks who was not capable of harnessing it himself.

They finally arrived at the town's center and castle home of the knight they followed. The trip took a fair bit of time as sometimes a crowd would gather to see the wolves that walked like men that accompanied the Knight. It was rather uncomfortable at times with all the eyes glaring but they were for the most part used to this and sometimes even enjoyed it when conditions were right.

Slip took note of the locks and doors of every location he could. He was a bit of sneak. Not a thief, a sneak. He kept a clear line in the sand when it came to thievery. It was not something he participated in since he began to travel with Spark. Spark was virtually a saint and the last thing Slip ever wished was to have Spark look at him through saddened eyes because of his actions. He hoped for much more then the casual relationship they had and being a thief would dash those rather quickly.

The knight took them inside and had his servants show them to some guest rooms. This was far more than either of them expected when they first saw this town on the horizon. In most cases they were allowed to trade and then were hustled out. This was a different ball of wax all together.

The two of them sat on beds in the guest quarters. Slip sniffed at it and to his surprised it was free of the fleas and pests that riddled most homes. Spark came to a conclusion then and there. This knight must be a wizard in hiding. There was no stopping the fleas and mites unless magic was in use.

"He's a wizard," he whispered to Slip.

"Yes, that I am." The knight appeared in the door. "And you, my canine friend, are as well."

Spark stood up. He was startled and shaken. Since he had taken this form he had never been snuck up on. This was not the only first he just experienced. He had also not been called "Wizard".

"Why have you revealed yourself to us? You know the laws of this land better than anyone I would assume."

"I need your help." The knight sat down on the bed across from Slip and Spark took a seat next to Slip. Slip's heart stuttered a little at the proximity. No matter how often he came in contact with Spark he was always happy when he was close. "My name is Sir Van Lief. I am the kings' nephew and he is obviously unaware of my Wizarding ways. There is trouble on the horizon. It seems that something from the south has crept into our lands and is taking innocent souls. When you mentioned where you were from I hoped that perhaps you might have some insight."

"I will tell you what I can. What are the... symptoms of this evil?" Dark and terrifying thoughts began to surface in Spark's mind. The situation this Knight was suffering was becoming all too familiar.

"A few weeks after a child or citizen disappears they return. Not as themselves but as a monsters looking to destroy their very own family. The poor folks that have been impacted by this are at their wits end. Charles in the market is now very aware that in a few weeks he may have to kill his own son." Sir Van Lief held his head in his hands. "I don't know where else to turn. The kings ban on wizards is damaging our ability to deal with this evil."

Spark stood and walked to the window. His thoughts wandered briefly to the last moments of the battle that eventually drove him from his home. The ball of fire that he let loose consumed his own family. The image was still fresh in his mind to this day.

"I can help and I will do whatever it takes." He turned to face Sir Van Lief. "His name is Cantrell. He is a necromancer from my lands that I thought I killed. I did not think I would ever have to deal with these memories again."

Tears began to spill from eyes of the white wolf. Slip stood up and took Spark into his arms. He did not know of the sorrow that was buried deep inside of Spark.

"I am sorry to hear that you have felt this loss as well. Perhaps together we can destroy it once and for all. Take some time and rest. We will head out in the morning and finish this. Now that I am not alone perhaps we can defeat this Cantrell together."

Spark stepped away from Slip. "No, we must go tonight. Cantrell cannot be seen during the day and Charles' son will not be saved unless we go soon. It takes a month or two for him to return the child or victim but only a couple of days to turn them into the monster."

"Then rest up and we will start the hunt this evening. I have to admit I did not expect an answer of this caliber from two Lupines. But I am glad my gut was right in expecting that you might be able to help." Sir Van Lief could not have been more sincere.

"Sir Van Lief, it is my fault he is here. Chances are that he knew I was coming this way. Your town is a victim of me not finishing the job. I left my town after the battle. I should have stayed. Maybe then your people would not have had to suffer because of the shame I felt in my failure to protect my family. Now it has come back. I will not make the same mistake this time. I give you my word." Spark's heart hurt. He felt shame for not taking care of this better the first time. "Slip, get some rest and prepare for a fight tonight. I have spells to prepare."

The three of them rested and readied for battle. This would not be an all out war but a battle fought by the few that were in this castle. The people of this land would be unaware of the titanic battle against evil that would unfold on this eve. As the sun set, they gathered in the main hall. Spark was

trembling slightly. He feared for his friend Slip. He was not a wizard like he and Sir Van Lief and could easily become a victim of Cantrell's magic.

"Slip, you do not have to take this fight on as your own. It is not one for non-mages and you may fall to his magics." Spark's voice was unsteady.

"I would not dream of leaving this battle to you alone. I will stand by you in the greatest of storms."

Sparks head swam with unfamiliar feelings. "Thank you, Slip. Let's go and save this world from the blight of Cantrell."

The three of them joined hands and bowed their heads. Sir Van Lief lead them in a chant. It gave them a glow. It was protection for them and all though it would not save them from the most powerful magic, perhaps it would be enough to give them an edge.

The serfs that were awake to see them leave town knew that magic was employed but not one of them would tell. They knew that perhaps that night they would finally be relieved of the evil that haunted them.

It was not long before they came upon a castle. It was not there during the day but was visible and assaulting to the senses at night. It was the same one that Spark encountered two years ago. The door opened and welcomed them. The wizard inside has been waiting to destroy the "man" that laid waste to him and his army.

The door slammed behind them. Slip for some reason had no fear. He should have. The room was far larger on the inside then the outside hinted. Certainly they were at the mercy of the Necromancer Cantrell.

"Come out, foul beast, and show yourself to your reapers!" Sir Van Lief was sometimes overly dramatic. The three of them explored the visually empty castle until evidence of its occupant appeared on the tower wall.

"Come up and receive your fate, Great Wizard of Redhill! You may have slowed my army but now you are in my castle and at my mercy." A cloud of acidic gas erupted from his fingers and shot towards them. Slip rolled and ran for the staircase leading up to the wizards level. Sir Van Lief and Spark bolted up and landed on the wall not far from the Necromancer.

When the explosion happened Slip was just coming into view. He could see the body of his companion flung to edge of the wall and over. Sir Van Lief pulled a sword that glowed with the radiance of the sun itself and began to slash at Cantrell. Slip reached the wall in time to catch the paw of his love before he fell. He looked down and into Sparks eyes. Sir Van Lief swung ferocious, controlled slashes of the Sunsword.

Cantrell opened his hand and tossed a palm full of powder into the air around Sir Van Lief freezing him in place then turned to see the blotch of black fur attempting to pull the white bane on his existence up the wall. With a single word lightning burst forth and covered Slip in a sparking mass of light. Spark looked back into the eyes of his friend. The pain of the attack was evident but across his lips the words, "I will never let you go" escaped past the grimace of pain. Slip, despite the assault, gave his last pull and achieved his goal.

When Spark came over the wall a bolt of flame burst out from his finger tips and struck at the feet of Cantrell. Cantrell leapt back and then dashed forwards and knocked back Spark. Spark slid on his tail leaving Cantrell standing over the now dazed and incapacitated Slip.

"Yet another one of your friends and family shall now perish before your very eyes." Cantrell raised his hand and a dagger of electricity formed.

"You will not let destroy those I love any longer, you monster."

The word love rang in Slip's ears. It seemed like an eternity of waiting and hoping was washed away with that one sentence. With that, Slip kicked out and tripped up the

necromancer. Spark clapped his hands freeing Sir Van Lief of his prison in space. There was a brief flash of movement. The Necromancer Cantrell crashed onto the stone floor with the sunsword protruding from his back.

Slip stood up slowly and turned to Spark, "Did you mean it?"

"Yes, I know when we met love between us did not seem like something at all possible. But now, I swear I will never leave your side." The embrace that followed gave way to celebration.

As the necromancer's body dissolved into the air the castle around them faded out and left behind dozens of children and townsfolk. They were confused and scared at first but after some explanation from Sir Van Lief they were able to wake up from the nightmare they just experienced.

Sir Van Leif turned to his lupine comrades. "You will be rewarded for you bravery beyond your wildest dreams. Come, let us celebrate!"

"I thank you for your enthusiasm. But I think Slip and I will be moving on." Spark took Slips hand. "I have been relieved of a burden that was weighing heavy on my heart. I wish to begin a journey home where I can rebuild what I lost and start a new life with a new mate."

"You will always be welcome here. And if you are ever in need, send a dove and I will come. I am in debt to you and Slip."

They shook hands and left the Knight and his citizens. Slip turned to Spark as they walked. "So, for how long now have you been secretly enjoying my cuddling you in the cold?"

Spark smiled and never said a word.

The Mouse looked up from his coffee. He stared, with unfocused eyes, at the yellowed ceiling of the Steak King. He noted, after a long and mindless moment, the patina of dusty grease coating the exposed pipe of the heating vent. He'd chosen this otherwise unwelcoming spot for the sake of that vent, his middle-aged bulk jammed into a corner booth at the apex of two outside windows.

Though the midnight wind howled round the corner of the diner, a blast of warm air from the rattling vent continued to send delightful shivers through his body, raising the fur on his neck and gooseflesh on his tail. He looked around. The diner housed about twenty tables, divided into booths with fold-up chairs.

A plump waitress, a badger old enough to be a grandmother (and young enough not to like it) had taken his order. She now lounged behind the counter with a newspaper and an illicit cigarette

"D'ye mind me smoking hun?" she'd slurred at him when he'd ordered, lighting before he could answer. "S'too cold outside."

The Mouse did not mind, though he disliked the habit. In a strange way the sight of a surly waitress puffing on a cigarette made him feel younger, put him in mind of days when people smoked everywhere and ashtrays stood in ranks along bank queues and in barbershops.

Somewhere, in the kitchen behind the counter, behind a wooden door and a grimy wall decorated with cracked brown tiles, a night shift cook was poking away at the sausage and eggs (over easy) the Mouse had ordered. There was no one else.

Why would there be? It was 2:45 am on a January morning in Willoughby, Middle of Nowhere, Ontario.

Perfect.

His eyes refocused on the white ceramic coffee mug in his hands. It had been a short day, a long evening, and an interminable night, and he was still miles from home and dawn. He and his car had zipped through the gloaming, homeward bound from a convention, on track and on time. Then, just after sunset, a highway closure sent him drifting through a void of unlit farms and shuttered crossroads villages, on single lane roads that kept turning into gravel tracks. The detour had been adventurous at first, then worrisome, as the gas tank in his battered hatchback dipped closer and closer to empty.

And then, finally, an actual town: Willoughby, population 1,700, home to a Lions Club, a Legion Hall, and three churches, at least according to the welcome sign. It was just strip of paved road lined with fifty year old storefronts, some boarded up, some scratching out of a business from the farmers and residents. He passed an abandoned railway station, dark and snow covered, and a newspaper office – the Willoughby Intelligence. He smiled as he drove past this building. The Mouse was a newspaper reporter by trade and always pleased to find signs of that medium lingering in the 21st century.

There was a modern multi pump gas station. He fuelled up and paid at the pump with a debit card, not once interacting with the bored teenage rat girl who was watching a miniature DVD player in the kiosk.

Another block on, and the town ended. The last building in Willoughby before fields and farms opened up again was the Steak King, an 24-hour greasy spoon of a kind you don't usually see this far from a highway. On the diner sign a cartoon T-Bone hovered over orange flames, though the colours had long since been weather-stained and sun-faded to an unappetizing yellow. The similarly faded and yellow interior looked warm and welcoming after the halogen glare of the gas station.

A plate of sausage and eggs (over easy) was placed with a clunk in front of him.

"Thanks," he said to the waitress, who replied with a nod and returned with a tired shuffle to the counter, before disappearing into the kitchen. The Mouse looked back down to his congealing eggs and tucked in to them with a sort of wan happiness, a contentment coloured by the awareness of long miles yet ahead.

As his wristwatch touched 3 a.m. he finished his eggs and pushed the plate away, once more paying some sort of attention to his surroundings. The diner was empty. The waitress was nowhere in sight, and the only sound the rumbling exhalation of the ceiling vent. Yet, there was something new. A plate of Eggs Benedict, smothered in cheap hollandaise rested on the table of a nearby booth, along with a steaming mug of coffee and an ashtray. He'd not seen those placed there. Odd.

The Mouse pulled out his reporter's notepad to doodle a few stray thoughts on the convention. Before he could put pen to paper, the lights in the diner flickered once, then went dark. The rumble of the air vent fell silent. There was flash outside, as of lighting, and a loud *crack* that made the Mouse jump and emit an involuntary squeak! A blown transformer outside, perhaps...? Before he could stand to investigate, the lights flickered on again. The furnace hummed into life.

The diner was exactly as it was, with the simple addition of an elderly, slightly dishevelled Goat, seated in front of the Eggs Benedict and coffee with a look of profound contentment. The Goat was about 70 years old, plump about the middle, and dressed in suspenders and rumpled shirt with an undone bow tie. He had an enormous beard of snow-white, and a wooden pipe was gripped between his teeth. Next to his plate was a folded tabloid newspaper, black and white on pulpy grey paper of a sort the mouse had not seen since his days as a newspaper boy.

The Mouse gaped a moment, and the Goat regard him cooly.

"I'm sorry... I didn't see you come in," he stammered, conscious of his stare.

"Nor should you have. Nor will you see me leave. I'm a bit surprised to see you, as well," replied the Goat. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone here at this hour."

"It's too early for most people."

"I don't mean the time, sir, I mean the hour. The hour of Dinerspace," the Goat took out his pipe and placed it on the table next to him, then started to tackle the Eggs Benedict.

"Dinerspace?"

The Goat nodded slowly, then pointed his butter knife at the Mouse's notebook.

"You're a newspaperman, are you?"

"Yes, I write for a few weeklies."

""Used to be I was editor, publisher, and chief bottle washer at the Intelligence, just down the road there. I'm on another beat these days," the Goat said.

He reached into his shirt pocket and passed over a thick business card, printed with a heavy gothic script across the top: The Asphodelian Witness. Below that, in a conservative Times Roman, "Digory Davies, editor-in-chief."

The Mouse tucked the card into his shirt pocket.

"I admit I've not heard of it... is it local?"

"Well, yes and no. Local at this hour. Soon to be distant. Got a copy here. Can't let you read it, I'm afraid."

The Goat waved the newspaper at his side. The Mouse caught a glimpse of the headline, something like "Epicureans lead Jesuits in Finals." The Goat continued.

"The circulation isn't huge, nothing like the Dis Informer, but the ads are paid on time, and we have the liveliest letters page you've seen," he said.

"The Disinformer? Seems like a bad name for a paper," the Mouse observed, unsure what to make the Goat.

"Not Disinformer. Dis. Informer. As in "Dis." You know: Dante, hell fire, red pajamas, hay forks and the Lord of Lies." The Goat frowned. "Actually, since Old Nick is editor in chief, I guess the Disinformer is a good name for it. Never thought of that before. Huh."

The Mouse wondered if the Goat were eccentric, insane, playing a joke on him, or all those things at once. He took a quick note on his pad.

"You mentioned Dinerspace?"

The Goat took a large gulp of coffee.

"You're interviewing me, son? Well, all right then. Let's see how good your short hand is. Dinerspace is... well..."

The Goat spread his arms, taking in the silent diner.

"This is Dinerspace. Here and now, but also a lot of other places and times. It's when and where the air smells like grease and coffee. It's a warm place when it's cold outside, glowing golden on a cold winter night. It's been around since the first Roman inn. The only thing that changes is the daily special," he said.

He watched as the Mouse took notes, following the movement of the pen. When the Mouse stopped writing, the Goat continued.

"It's the middle ground between light and shadow, between 3 a.m. and sunrise, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the pit of man's fears or the summit of his knowledge. It is the dimension of quiet indigestion, of the cup of coffee a man can linger over before heading into the office. It is the waiting room of the soul, the hour of respite between waking and working. You walk into it from anywhere, and, therefore,

logically speaking, you can walk out of it and get anywhere. That's Dinerspace."

The Goat looked worried for a moment.

"Is Rod Serling still alive?"

The Mouse shook his head.

"Good. He won't mind me stealing his material," the Goat grinned, taking another heaping forkful of sauce laden egg.

The Mouse laughed.

"Seriously, though, where are you from?"

The Goat shrugged.

"I could tell you. Limbo City, the Asphodel Meadows Estates. You won't believe me. That's all right. I wouldn't either, without seeing it myself."

The Mouse tugged his whiskers thoughtfully.

"Okay. For the sake of the argument, let's say you're from Limbo. I assume you mean the domain of the virtuous dead? So, would this mean that you are also dead?"

The Goat snorted.

"Well, I guess I was virtuous by some lights. Smoked and drank too much for my own good, and never took any fatuous nonsense from a preacher or a mayor. I looked after facts, not ideals, though I guess I had a few of those too, and stuck by them. Stuff like, 'Comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable' and 'Follow the money.' And, yes, I'm dead all right. I died about five minutes after putting the Friday edition to bed one night in 1973, right there at my desk."

The Goat waved his fork around.

"Used to come in here every morning for breakfast, nearly, and had the same thing. I only get here once or twice in a blue moon now, when Dinerspace is just right. First time I've

seen someone in here, though. I guess you and I just happened to enter this particular bit of Dinerspace at the same time."

He peered at his wristwatch, a silver wind up with a brown leather strap. The Mouse peered at his own watch, and found it silent and still at 3 a.m. The Goat coughed.

"Just about time to head out. But ask me something, if you like, before I go."

"Well, do you know anyone famous?"

The Goat chuckled.

"Not a very original question, but sure. Not really friends with any of 'em, though I've had lunch with Edward R. Murro. I interviewed Aristotle when I was newly arrived and feeling ambitious. Once I saw Groucho and Karl Marx do a sort of dinner theatre tour. And, just last week, I went to listen to Upton Sinclair and Marie Stopes argue about socialism and the afterlife. G.K. Chesterton got into an argument with Mama Cass at the reception after."

The Mouse blinked.

"Chesterton is in Limbo?"

The Goat grinned, and rose to leave, tucking the newspaper under his arm.

"Turns out Chesterton didn't want Heaven, so much he wanted as a place where he could drink and be content and eccentric, and sparkle wittily in front of a drawing room fire. Limbo's good for that. He's just missing one thing to make it heaven for himself, in fact."

"What's that?"

"Bernard Shaw got into Heaven, and Chesterton's still writing letters to the editor to complain about it."

The Goat extended a hand.

"Pleased to meet you, son. Maybe we'll see you in Limbo someday soon, unless you're sure enough about the universe to get in upstairs or downstairs. Lot of reporters in Limbo, you know."

The Mouse shook the Goat's hand. It was warm, and not, as he feared, the clammy hand of a corpse.

"So, you'll just walk out, then...?"

The Goat nodded.

"You won't see it, though."

The Mouse looked down at his notes. The lights in the diner flickered. The Mouse looked up, the lights blazed back into life, and the Goat was gone.

The Mouse reached into his shirt pocket, and drew out the Goat's business card. He stared at it for a long moment, and then put it into his wallet.

They might need a reporter, some day.

THE TIDES

A commission for Mimi Badger

The sun was rising in the east when Belinda finished the summons. The great dragon looked upon her work with pride and could see that the effort was going to be worth it. She needed to know what the humans planned on doing about her, so over the evening the ancient one summoned from the stars an equally great beast.

Her name will be Shadow, a fantastic creature of black scales and midnight wings. Her teeth would be the last white any man would see if they challenged her. Her mind would be sharp and talented. She would have some of Belinda's very own traits. Tricks of the mind would support talents of the flesh, and skills far beyond that of the humans will rise like cream on a well-tended farm.

But for Shadow, life would be short, at least compared to that of the great dragon. She only needed to serve her purpose and then would disappear from sight, leaving mystery and confusion in her wake. Belinda did not want other dragons in her territory. The earth proper was not really her stomping ground, but she felt it best that the humans feared her and her alone. So when the sun set on the last season of this very year, Shadow would no longer walk the earth, or the heavens for that matter.

The summons was complete and a star blinked. The lumbering steps of Shadow slowly faded until she looked like the humans of which she was to watch. This world was not ready for the beast to show her real face. This would drive the humans away and hinder her job. So she lived among them and listened. She learned new things every day, good things and bad. And over time she began to understand something more important than her task was happening. Her time was running out.

With her last month she searched frantically for a solution. Belinda, her creator, was furious. She knew that Shadow would find a way to gain her freedom, so she set loose Wizard. Wizard waited until Shadow came to him. He looked older than the earth itself and Shadow was taken aback by how much of her story he knew. Her tricks of the mind did nothing

to him, and he could see that she was truly a dragon in humans clothing. He told her he could help and this was no lie. She would have to eat the very stars. Consume the very energy that created her. With this, she could break free from Belinda's grasp and lead a life of her own.

By now, Shadow had learned what it meant to be truly alive. She has seen what the humans could accomplish, both the good and bad. It stirred a desire, deep in her breast, to show herself and set free the oppressed and the needy. She saw them as she saw herself, trapped.

"How do I eat these stars, Wizard?"

"You must open your heart and mind to them. Give it all up. And when you do you will be able to drink from them. But, be careful, for when you open yourself as needed, you will be vulnerable to Belinda. For those brief moments she will be able to reach from her distant perch and pluck you back to the heavens." He gestured upwards to the stars.

"Thank you, Wizard, it is a risk I must take." And with those words she took off for the sky and the human guise fell from her and she disappeared into the inky blackness of the the evening sky.

She was exhilarated! In all her life she did not know what a marvelous sensation her very own body could produce. The wind brushed past every scale on her body and she spun onto her back. She could feel the stars tiny lights sparkling across her satin black scales. She opened her heart to the woes of the stars; the world shook. She opened her mind to the pains of the stars; the world shuddered.

She drank deep, taking their pains from them and received the life blood she needed in return. As she was about to have her fill, from the corner of her eye she could see a great clawed hand coming to meet her on the edge of space. She rolled and the claws swatted her down. She was plummeting towards the earth and she knew there was nothing at this point

that would take her back to the cosmos. She escaped the grasp of Belinda. Her body was falling and her wings were torn from Belinda's devastating blow. She was uncertain of her ability to survive the crash, but Belinda was not. She knew the dragon would survive, and well at that.

So with her last chance to exact revenge, she ordered Wizard to make another move. His first was to get Shadow within the grasp of the great dragon in the sky. His second would be to trap her in the earth. He threw out the salts and chanted from his books, and when Shadow came crashing down, she disappeared into the earth.

.....

What only seemed like minutes to Shadow was thousands of seasons passing. She felt the ground chill around her and thaw. The sun rose and fell, day after day, year after year. Belinda had destroyed her after all, or so she thought.

One day that should have been nothing but a blink seemed to drag. As a man scratched his foot in the dirt above he called for great machines to be brought in. At one side hung a sword and on the other a blunderbuss. Both of which were terrible weapons. He kept his hand on the sword as he directed the great steam powered machines to dig the very earth he stood upon. Occasionally he would reach up and touch a gem he had hanging around his neck.

Shadow began to take note of her surroundings. Not too far off in the distance she could see a great city. The smell of coal began to permeate her nostrils and she could see all sorts bustling about and hear the chatter of their minds, not unlike that of a farm overflowing with geese.

Suddenly she felt a pressure on her side and from the soil she was pulled. The spell had been broken. How long had she been in the earth, she wondered. Most likely there was no way of knowing. But she knew these were different times. The men were not afraid of a great beast such as her. The elderly man

who gave the orders looked her up and down. He was dressed in red velvet. His collar was white lace and his tights were far to white to be a member of any actual construction brigade.

He bowed lightly, "Shadow, I presume."

"Uh, yes." She was slightly staggered. "How did you... You know?"

"Well, my grandfather was a great story teller. One story he told me as a child was of a legendary dragon that fell from the stars. They say she crashed in this very spot. The villagers stayed far away from this area for over a thousand years for fear of waking the beast. Me, on the other hand, would rather wake the beast and be sure it existed rather than live in fear of what is uncertain."

He strutted around her examining her carefully.

"My name is Shepherd, and I'd like to challenge you to a duel."

"A duel? I would rend you limb from limb?"

"You may, but I have cannons that would surely take the advantage away from you. This is what I would like to offer. We both use swords. I will not use cannons or outside men and you do not use claws, teeth or any other mystical abilities that you may possess that I cannot possibly be aware of. If I win, you work for me."

"And if I win?" she asked with a toothy grin.

"You are free. No debt to me for having released you from your prison." Shadow had not thought of her place in the earth as a prison until that very moment. She was truly in debt to this man and almost thought it would be kind of her to let him win so that she may repay him in some way.

"Agreed." But she knew that a fight was something she could not take a dive in. A dragon had too much pride to let themselves do that.

The battle was not brief and she took her time in showing Shepherd that she was a far superior master of the sword than he was. On several occasion she would bring him to the brink of loss just to let him slip out and continue the battle. Shepherd began to falter, his age showing, and eventually he gave up and could see very well that the dragon was toying with him.

"Shadow, must you mock me? Is it not enough to gain your freedom?"

"What is it exactly you would have me do for you, Shepherd? Cook and clean? Would that not be mocking me if you won?" Her tongue was often sharp when humans were involved. Her adrenaline all but removed the appreciation she truly did feel for this man freeing her.

"My people are fighting for their freedom and losing. Talents like yours may turn the tides."

Shadow placed her giant hand upon Shepherd's worn shoulders, "All you had to do is ask."

"Thank you, dragon. With your help I will gain my freedom, also." When Shepherd looked up, Shadow could see deep into the eyes of the old man. He too was thousands of years old, but last time she saw him he was called Wizard.

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

A commission for Chazore

The thorns cut into his tender pads as he huddled in absolute silence. His heart raced every time he heard the branches, no matter how close or far the snap. Every so often his hand would check his satchel to be sure the letter had not been lost in the chase. With every passing moment he became more certain of his escape and began to slowly creep from his nook under the tattered fern. Each step was carefully placed for maximum stealth. He could still hear his mothers words: "Be still and quiet when the air is still and quiet, and you be safe." But he could not handle waiting any longer.

Just as the light broke and his grey mousy body lunged forward, a large leather clad paw came crashing down on his tail. He knew immediately it was broken. The snap he heard was not that of a twig. He tried to pull away with all his might, but the wolf's large claw laden paw grabbed him by the scruff of his neck.

"Well, what do I have 'ere?" To accent his nasty attitude he tore off one of the pour mouse's ears with a snap of his sharp canines. The mouse shrieked in pain and snapped up with his incisors, catching the wolf on the tip of his sensitive nose. The wolf yelped and dropped the mouse to grab his nose. Off scurried the mouse. Despite the pain his mind raced with hopes of escaping to the south cliffs.

"Ah ha ha!" laughed the wolf's companion. He looked over at him as the blood poured from the gash on his most prominent of features. "Never mind me! What way did the little bastard go?"

The companion, nearly blind, sniffed at the air and pointed his muzzle towards the cliffs. "That way."

The chase was on for the second time in as many minutes. The little mouse's legs burned and his lungs began to hurt. But he knew rescue could be found just ahead, so he dared not give up. He could feel the ground begin to thump around him, and he began to dart back and forth to dodge the stomping feet of his pursuers. He could only hope their focus was on him and not what lay ahead. Just as the cliff was steps away he reached

up and grabbed some hanging vines, managing to snare what would be his salvation. His body swung out and around back toward safety as the pair of wolves found themselves without soil beneath their feet.

Their screams stopped with a thud, and the mouse's heart sank in realization of what he had done. Certainly, it was him or them, but never before had ever even considered harming, let alone killing. After a long sit down to catch his breath and shake his head of what had just happened, he got up and continued on with his mission.

.....

It was a sunny day for a parade. Nearly perfect in every way. A few shenanigans from some of the local goons had put Chazore in a bit of a mood for some mischief of her own. She began to follow them and observed as they worked their nimble fingers into the pockets of the parade goers. She watched them, time after time, check the pockets of those sitting in the stands or standing at the side of the crowded road. However, not a handful of anything ever came out, until one of the sly felines pulled a ticket from a pocket. But not any normal ticket, as it turned out. It was indeed a beer ticket.

Since in this case the hoodlum was a minor, Chazore figured she'd have a little fun. She followed them to the beer tent at the bazaar where the parade was to end, and waited next to the vendors. The vendor did not open until the parade was over, so no doubt the original owner of the ticket would be there in time for the show. She stood and stretched her tawny body to gather the attention of the server and rested her elbows on his counter, batting her eyes a few times.

"Do you think you could give me the slightest of samples of today's mead?" Her rainbow hue shifted as she pressed her

bosom for maximum effect. The bartender went a bright shade of red and wobbled in the knees.

"D... D... I'm sorry milady. . . but I cannot give a sample without a ticket or until I am open. You see, they watch me awful close like, and if I get caught I'll lose the privilege of serving at the princess' ball next week." It was all Chazore needed to hear. The fellow was a man of reputation and would give a good look to any youth with a ticket.

As the parade bells rang and the festivities in the bazaar began to climb, she approached the youth to slow his advance on the beer garden. She chatted with him and her charms drew his sight away from the rightful owner, who was now in line next to him. As the pair saddled up for their drinks, she waited patiently for the gentleman to realize he had been relieved of his beverage by the nimble fingers of a pick pocket. As he began to search and fluster over his missing ticket, Chazore placed her index finger under the youths chin as if she were going in for a kiss.

"I find it *intriguing* that someone with such a *youthful appearance* could muster the ability to gain access to a beer ticket." And with that statement, she led his eyes to the gentleman next to him in line. When their eyes met, they both realized what Chazore was getting at, and with flash the hoodlum was off and through the crowd.

It was days like today that she had the most fun. For a Draconis Smilidon Fatalis the chase could make the day. With speed and grace she sprinted through the crowd after the pick pocket. All the while she could easily have caught him, but instead enjoyed the panicked look in his eye every time he glanced back to see if he had lost his pursuer. He headed for the woods at the north end of the village and as he hit the tree line she heard a sharp squeak. She slid to a stop, letting the lad go, and looked down. At the very tip of her toes, all balled up and shaking, was the tiniest of mice.

She squatted down and ran her fingers down his back. He looked up with his brown eyes in stark terror. "Oh please, oh

please, let me go! I must help my family!" At that point his little body could take no more and passed out from exhaustion.

Chazore picked him up and carried him back to her inn, placing him gingerly on the table. She then began to drip water from the tip of her claw across his mouth and over his forehead. Never had she seen such a little guy. She cleaned his torn ear gently and he cringed in his sleep. Chazore place him in the cigar box at the end of the counter with a handkerchief. She was resolved to wait with the others in the bar, who had gathered around to hear the tale that this little soldier would have when he awoke.

It was not more than an hour that he began to stir. The fox behind the counter told all to hush. "He's waking up!" Chazore came at once.

When his eyes opened, he flinched at first. But then relaxed when he saw that he was in a building, and what seemed like a friendly place. He nervously reached into his satchel and pulled out a tiny letter. His paw shook as he held it out. He did not leave home often, and the sight of so many carnivores was making him involuntarily nervous. Chazore took the letter from him and thanked him.

Dear Sir or Madam,

We, the people of Port Furlong, are under siege and humbly request any and all aid available. If you are reading this letter it means one particularly brave mouse has successfully escaped the clutches of the ruthless pirates that have invaded our fair town. It has been nearly two weeks since they landed unexpectedly in our port one night, and the strain on the town has resulted in the death of two townsfolk. If we do not get help soon it may be too late for many more.

The pirates are from a ship called the Wolf's Tooth, and her commander is the dreaded Captain Blackrun. He has made it clear that while he is not looking for a fight, he is prepared for one, and will execute anyone who fights back. They managed to

subdue our Port guards while they were out enjoying some "entertainment" off site. He has made hostages out of my mate and kits and it was the bravery of this young mouse that got this letter to you. Please take good care of him, and please hurry before more lives are lost to these fiends.

Humbly, Your Servant,

Mayor Reginald R. Foxcrest

Chazore looked down at the tiny mouse in disbelief.

"You poor little guy. Port Furlong is nearly two days walk from here for someone my size. You must be famished."

Chazore grabbed some bread from the counter whilst the others read the letter. Once it had a gone all the way around the room Chazore cleared her throat.

"So who's with me? We must do something to help them."

The ears and tails in the room did not give a strong vote of confidence that Chazore was going to get any help on this venture. (Not that she needed any. The only thing more powerful than her confidence was her ability to get the job done.)

"Sorry, Milady, but I think you're on your own again. The note was very clear. This is the crew of the Wolf's Tooth that has taken over the Port. I have a mate and cubs of my own to take care of, and this group of pirates is known to sport some heavy weapons and mean teeth. I am pretty sure that most furs that you talk to in these here parts are going to feel the same." He hung his head. He felt shame for not wanting to help, but was terrified and worried of what kind of wrath would come for his family if any member of the Wolf's Tooth crew discovered his part in helping to free the Port.

"I'll help you." It was almost missed it was so quiet. Chazore's eyes looked down at the mouse in disbelief.

"I bet you can. But there is little or no time for you to rest here." Chazore walked over to her table and picked up her

satchel. She scanned around the room. "So is our fair barkeep correct? Not a soul to help the Port?"

No one answered. This tavern was filled with furs that had heard too many stories of the dreaded crew of the Wolf's Tooth.

"Ladies and gents, do not fret or feel shame for not helping. I have no affiliations and they will not seek revenge on me. I understand your fears. But I want you ALL to remember what such a small fur has accomplished. Do not ever doubt that even the smallest effort can make a difference. "

Chazore opened her satchel and let the mouse step in. She slung it so it sat between her wings and headed out the door. She knew that with little to no help she would have to use her wits as her prime weapon. She was more than enough of a fighter to take down most of the crew, but as sure as the sun would come up tomorrow, the pirates would be well dug into this town and ready for trouble.

After a couple hours' flight, the cliffs that guard Port Furlong from the north could be seen from where she touched down. They landed in some woods and Chazore took the Satchel off, letting the mouse out. When he saw the woods he knew where he was, and his sadness was instantly visible.

"What's wrong, little guy?"

"Well you see, milady Chazore, when I was trying to get away from the village I led two wolves off the cliff. I don't think they could have survived the fall and it makes me feel awful inside."

Chazore sat down. She picked him up and looked at him carefully. He was very tiny even for a mouse. "Such a big heart, but if I were you I would not worry about the wolves. They know that their line of work often leads to an early retirement- if you catch my drift."

"I know what you are saying, but it still makes me feel a bit ill." He stood up as tall as he could. "But you know what... I can't wait to see you in action. I've heard bigger tales told about you than I have about those nasty pirates."

Chazore blushed slightly. She knew her reputation preceded her but it still stopped her heart a moment when someone gave her praise. Sometimes folks do not realize how strong a few words can be. It only takes the memory of kind words to make a someone's day, and this little guy had just accomplished that.

"So, Mister Mouse, what can you tell me about the challenge ahead?"

"Well, milady Chazore," he began.

"Just Chazore, sweetie."

"Well, Chazore," he grinned big and smiled as he spoke. "Your main problem is going to be making sure that the ship's armaments are disabled before they notice. Once they notice something is amiss they will open fire, levelling the town and killing anyone caught in the barrage."

"Well, that is a problem then, isn't it? It seems like I am going to need to be in two places at once. I will have to take care of the ship and make sure hostages don't become collateral damage." Chazore was thinking hard. She had seen this town during her travels before and knew that it was a dangerous thing trying to manage a battle over such a large area. She moved quickly, but the fighting could get thick, and once involved in a battle it's hard to keep track of everything.

"Mister Mouse,"

"Pyat is fine."

"Pyat, do you think you could sneak back into the city?" Chazore lay on her tummy with her face held in her hands just a few inches from the little fellow. He was smitten by her and would probably walk into a burning building if she'd asked. He was sitting back and she could see the cuts he had sustained

from the thorns earlier. While he hemmed and hawed about sneaking back into the city she took out some salve she saved for special occasions and tickled his pads with it. In no time the magical properties of the ointment worked their way and his cuts began to fade. It was great for situations such as these. It would not take care of big wounds but did little miracles like this regularly.

"I do believe I can, Chazore. You see, I could not get up the cliff without them noticing, but in returning I can drop from an overhanging tree onto the roof where they are holding some of the hostages. I don't think it will be a problem for me to get back into the town unnoticed." He was beginning to look a lot more chipper now that his feet were not bothering him so much.

"Then I think I might be able to pull this off without anyone getting hurt. Well. . . not the townsfolk anyways. What you need to do is get into where the hostages are and warn them that I am going to take over the ship. When the pirates get distracted from the sound of the guns going off, they have to make their move to either bar the doors or take on the guards."

Pyat scratched his head. "You really think that it's going to be that easy?"

"Well, let's just say the guns won't be the only thing diverting their attention. I have a great idea that will keep them occupied and, perhaps, make the seas a safer place."

"I think I am more worried than before." Pyat's ears laid back. "Are you sure I can do this? What if someone dies, again?"

"As I said, Pyat, these furs knew what they were getting into and made their choice to be a pirate a long time ago. If they get hurt or killed it is a risk they have accepted in exchange for the rewards they have reaped." Chazore stood up and began to stretch.

"Rewards?"

"Yeah, many pirates retire very wealthy. Especially if they get recruited to a good ship like the Wolf's Tooth. They have medical insurance, of sorts, and all sorts of perks. It's what makes furs want to be pirates. On a good ship they get a cut of the spoils. Think of how many galleons have been taken down by these particular pirates."

"I never thought of them like that before. They are sort of a floating army that earns its own keep." Pyat was looking decidedly less worried. He looked back at Chazore one last time before he left. "I hope this works. . . I've been awfully worried about my family. They have been locked up in a wire cage for over a week now. Good luck, Chazore, and I hope to hear your distraction soon."

Pyat scurried off under the ferns and stayed well out of view. Chazore finished her stretch and began to fly a long circle around to the far side of the Wolf's Tooth. She began a low approach to the Wolf's Tooth, and hoped that their extended stay in the Port had blinded them to any dangers approaching them from the sea. On her tour she could see other ships out in the distance that were hoping to dock at the Port, but had instead decided to wait out at sea after seeing the pirates in the harbour.

She was lucky and got in close enough to dive into the water and make an underwater dash for the base of the ship. Once there she clawed her way up the side until she arrived at the first row gun port. It was not too hard for her to pry open, and with most of the men in town carousing, she had the run of the place on the lower levels.

She moved a pair of cannons and chocked them in place. With a nudge into the downward direction, the barrels were aimed at a section of ship below the water line. Now for part two. She moved from among the cannonballs and tied a rope to each chock on the side where she'd aimed the cannons. She then led the rope to the gun port she planned on using. Once all was in place, she lit some wicks and dove out of the port

while hanging onto the ropes. Behind her she could hear cannon balls rolling across the floor. She knew that any second now the ship would begin its decent.

Meanwhile, the hole in the tavern wall where most of the captives were being held was directly in front of the young mouse. Pyat had already passed word to the other locations where prisoners were being held, and was now prepared to enter the most dangerous of them. This one was the most heavily guarded, if he remembered correctly.

The edges of the hole were tattered with gnaw marks and he could smell urine and feces wafting from inside. He hoped for the best, but was not in high hopes of finding everything on the inside being in tip top shape. This room was what gave him the most concern, and had driven him to make a break for it when asked.

Pyat poked his nose into the hole and slowly stepped inside. The sudden squeeze made him squawk rather than squeak. It seems a pirate was on to him before he had even realized it. He was being crushed to death and knew if he did not get a break soon it would be the end of his efforts to help his fair port town. Just then, true to her word, Chazore created quite possibly the greatest distraction (for pirates, at least) anyone could have asked for. It seems when your valued ship begins to sink, it draws the attention of pretty near every pirate that is not in process of enjoying the most sinister of acts.

The pirate that was putting the squeeze on Pyat was stunned to see and hear the explosions from below deck. The fire that erupted from the hatches was quenched quickly by the onrushing flood of water. Men were attempting to abandon ship only to encounter a raving maniac. Chazore was doing her best impersonation of a mad dragon and scaring the wits out of the pirates. Most of them simply leapt overboard rather than deal with her. This was doing a fine job of deterring any pirates from organizing the chaos.

Quin was his name, the pirate Quin. He would soon be forever remembered as Quin the coward. The blood gushed from his finger, and the mouse that had created the lesion scurried up his arm, into the collar of his puffy shirt. Repeated biting and gnawing from the incisors of the little rodent terror sent him screaming from the room like a child exiting a haunted carnival ride. He kept grabbing at himself, only to miss the cause of the painful bites. The surviving pirates would forever remind him of the day that a mouse made him yell for "Mommy"!

The boat began its roll. The ropes on the dock were straining against the massive weight of the ship and lost the battle one by one. The nefarious captain of this vessel made his way from his quarters and leapt to the dock from the rolling ship, prepared to battle the mad lunatic dragon that was terrifying his crew.

"Chazore!" He yelled her name through his teeth. "You will pay for this with your life! I should have killed you long ago."

Chazore turned and grinned. "You would have, too, if you hadn't been so busy staring at my breasts. Your reputation took quite the hit that day if I remember correctly, captain! And that is Milady Chazore to you!"

Chazore raised her braced arm up to block his cutlass as it came bearing down. She did not see the second blade leave his belt until it was almost too late. It trimmed the fur across her taught belly and reminded her of whom she was dealing with. Capt. Blackrun was feared by nearly every soul in these lands except for one. Chazore. This is not to say she did not have respect for his abilities with a blade, but instead had an admiration for the way he danced about as he fought.

She backed up and matched his foot work. After a few swipes with her razor sharp claws he adjusted his style. He began to lunge rather that swing and Chazore had to perform some fancy footwork to stay in a safety zone. For nearly ten

minutes they parried each other's blows and occasionally skimmed the surface of each other's glistening fur.

Chazore's skill in such a direct attack was reaching its critical limit. The captain was beginning to catch on to her adjustments and was heading them off at each step. But in a battle this intense the ability to stay calm was more valuable that all the gold in the land. Chazore began using the movement of the fight to scan her surroundings and saw what she needed to do. She stepped in tight and risked a strike from his dagger. The risk turned out to be greater than expected and she took a cut just under her left breast. It was minor in damage but gave Capt. Blackrun a feeling that victory was at hand. This feeling would soon be soiled by an onslaught of fish and their nets.

In her movement she managed to take a swipe at the rope hooked to the fishing nets that had been left out in the sun, still filled with rotting fish from the previous week's crews. When the pirates arrived they locked everyone up and no work had been done since. Captain Blackrun found himself pinned under half a ton of rotting fish with a set of razor sharp claws grasping him by the gullet.

"Now Captain, It seems that for a second time I have bested you. I recommend asking your crew to free whatever prisoners have not freed themselves already." At that moment Quin the coward ran by screaming at the top of his lungs about a filthy little rodent and dove into the water. On the edge of the dock Pyat was left standing dusting himself off with rather pride filled grin.

"Certainly, Chazore."

Chazore tightened her grip.

"That's Milady Chazore. You will not be so lucky a third time."

"Yes, Milady Chazore," he gulped. "Crew, free the prisoners!"

None of them moved. Chazore was already a bit winded and was not ready to fight off the entire crew of the Wolf's Tooth.

"No sir. You docked us here on shore for a week and got our ship sunk! Do eet yourself you salty bastard."

It seemed that no ship meant no Captain. The Port's people began to come out of their lock ups, many of them squinting in the first sunlight they had seen in weeks. By the time they got down to the dock, the Wolf's Tooth was completely overturned and the Captain was in shackles. Next to him stood Chazore with Pyat perched proudly on her shoulder. She took him and placed him on the ground, where he ran into the arms of his awaiting family as a hero.

Chazore stuck around the port for a few days until the navy could come and collect the Captain and any pirates that could be corralled. A few of them escaped but would not last long in these parts. After a couple of weeks she returned to the tavern where she was staying. It was a short flight and Pyat was sad to see her go.

"Hey Milady, a letter for yah!" the barkeep was always happy to let her have a room on the house. It helped keep the riff raff out. She stood from her current cushiony spot in the corner where a young lad also sat, with his head hanging low.

"Listen, you can take off now, but if I catch you pick pocketing again I am going to drag you to your mother's and **tell-her-everything. Got it?**"

He nodded and scampered out of the tavern. Chazore padded up and grabbed the letter. She grinned and handed it back. After a few moments, when it seemed that the important locals had read through it, she asked again: "So, who's with me?"

She still got sick every time the station adjusted for its tilt. It was a real heavy sway this time and she just couldn't handle it. It gave her butterflies like when a pilot hammered the rudder on an aircraft without completing the rest of the turn. As she rushed for the waste disposal unit, she was a colour not normally found among the human race. She was caught off guard by the adjustment this time and was father away then she would have normally been if she was warned.

Being sick in space was an unfortunate occurrence and was very much looked down upon by the rest of the crew. She felt that it made her look weak to them. They usually ignored her on her way to the dump unit. It was in reality them making an effort to downplay the situation. They were worried about it at the beginning of the mission. Four years ago she finished her first week up here without incident. But as soon as the station had to make an axial adjustment it hit her. The first one was a disaster. The whole crew was horrified and they made such a big deal about it that Carol became reclusive and, despite the efforts of the rest of the crew, never really came out of her shell. Alone in space is the only strong feeling she ever allowed to creep to the surface of her thoughts.

As she pulled her head from the disposal her long hair that she cherished so much brushed against the cup and was littered with the remnants of breakfast. Her face turned red and she waived her fist about. "I want off this station now!" Her scream was only met by R.I.C.K. Rick, being a robot, really had nothing to say about the situation. It was programmed to help keep the occupants of the station comfortable. It could attempt to adapt to their needs but often lacked the guidance it needed from the individuals to be of any real help. It could repair and modify itself and even develop the skills needed to give the astronauts a hand with everyday duties. But it did not yet know how to respond to a request to leave.

Lights flashed on in Ricks eyes. It looked about the room trying sort out how to help this obviously distressed woman. Being that it could not understand entirely what was going on,

instead of performing any other task it waited for her to move away from the disposal and then moved in to clean it.

"You know, Rick, you could have just held my hair out of the way." The exasperation in her voice was wasted on Rick. He just looked at her and filed her comments for examination later. Perhaps once the disposal was cleaned. Carol turned her back to Rick and left the room in a huff.

Harry, the captain of this station came passing through the room shortly after. Rick was still doing his best to make sure the disposable was free of all debris before moving on and about the station looking for someone to please. His only task was to make sure the faces he met had smiles. Sure it may sound odd, but can you think of anything more important when long term isolation is at hand?

"Come on Rick, go to stasis. You clock is counting down." Harry thought to himself how stupid that thing was for such and advanced piece of equipment. There were days when its brilliance was a mere penny from a million dollars to being sentient but when it really counted it always seemed to need him to solve a problem for it. Little did Harry know that is what Rick needed to do to keep Harry from going crazy. Harry was in constant need of reassurance. Without that feeling of usefulness his days would be unfulfilled and Rick picked up on this early. He gave Harry false tasks on a regular basis just to make him feel better about doing his job.

The brilliance behind Ricks programming was hidden from all the subjects. They were truly unaware of how important Rick was to this mission. He kept them on course and on schedule. Discreetly prodding them into action or screwing up other plans to help them avoid procrastination. The group often felt Rick was as much a pain as help sometimes but without him the mission may have been lost on several occasions.

Rick finished up and walked off to his charge center. He would upload what he learned today about the crew's behaviour. It was studied by mission control. They often came to conclusions about space travel that they did not like. Human are just not meant for this kind of stress. It was going to take someone special and this mission was going to educate them as to how to find them.

A couple of days passed and Rick spent a lot of time watching Carol. She needed something and he did not know what yet. So of course he watched. The station began to shift and Carol turned green again. She headed for the disposal and before she could get there Rick was waiting. He held her hair.

At first she was startled and then it occurred to her that Rick was around her an awful lot lately. She felt as though he may have been worried about her. When she was finished being sick she looked up as she wiped her mouth and Rick handed her piece of cloth. His eye's luminescence caught her by surprise. In the years she had been here she has never been this close to Rick. He always kind of creeped her out. But now he was here holding her hair as she had asked last time she was sick.

"Thank you, Rick" She was surprised when Rick nodded. He had never responded to her this way before. "To think, I thought you were just a dumb robot"

She could feel the soft rubber tips of his fingers glide across her back as he let down her hair. And she wondered what else Rick could learn if asked. "You know Rick, since you've been so helpful I was wondering if you could help me out with a few things."

Rick just stared at her. She felt stupid for a moment and then remembered he rarely responded with anything but actions. "Come with me."

She headed for her private quarters. She had one hell of a mess brewing and never thought of asking Rick to take care of it before now. As they headed down the hall together they

passed Sheila. This was not Carol's favourite crew member. She was often viewed as her primary antagonist.

"Carol, don't forget tonight is your turn to set the lab into action. It's the fourth quarter and we need results if we're ever going to get out of here." Sheila's nasal voice penetrated her current happy mood.

"Don't forget it's your turn..." Carol mimicked under her breath. She did not respond other than a nod. She kept on walking towards here room where she would find out just what Rick could do.

Once inside Rick stood at the door. Carol was kind of in a funk after her brief encounter with Sheila. She figured the best way to get Rick to help her out was to have him begin sorting the junk and clutter around her quarters. Most of it was stuff stolen from around the ship so she could make little figures and dioramas. She ordered Rick to begin sorting and then began to chatter away while she worked.

The time flew by. The station did not feel so cold and lonely for her all of a sudden. She realized she had been talking to Rick for hours. His battery level light was flashing and alarms went off in her mind. Harry would be looking for Rick. When his batteries got this low there was a worry that the crew would have to carry him back to the stasis unit to get him recharged. The last time this happened it took them hours to complete the unnecessary task. It rarely happened unless Rick got stuck in an area like the kitchen where that hatch switch has been broken since the third week in space.

"Rick, go to stasis." Carol got up and opened her door for Rick.

"See you tomorrow, Rick."

Rick continued on his way. He was not far down the hall when Carol heard Harry berating the Robot for being stupid and useless. Before Carol could come out of her room and fire

back at him they were already out of the section and out of earshot.

When Carol woke up from her sleep period she panicked. She had forgotten to set the lab in motion. She jumped out of bed and ran to the lab in her PJ's and started the system. She was reminded of an old Jetsons cartoon where George's job was to simply press the start button. As she came out of the room Sheila was standing in the hall watching her leave with a smug look on her face.

Since she was already up she figured she would stop by the kitchen and grab breakfast before she went back and got dressed. She gathered up her rations and headed for the exit. Her hands were full and Rick just came in with Harry.

"OK Rick, let's see if you can finally fix this blasted door." Harry seemed to be less and less patient with Rick every day. There was only a few months left and the strain was starting to show. Carol just stopped and watched for a moment as Harry looked down at the parts.

"Rick! These parts are still not right! Your logs indicated that these were the ones we needed! You have got to be the stupidest piece of equipment on this station, you know that?"

"How dare you! Rick is brilliant! You have no idea what he is capable of! Come on Rick, let's go somewhere you are appreciated!" Carol fumed. She dropped her food and grabbed the screwdriver hanging next to the actuator. She was flustered and it took a moment for her to jimmy the connection and get the door open. When it opened Sheila was on the other side.

"MOVE!" Carol screamed, prompting Sheila to drop her tray that she was bringing back to the kitchen. "Let's go, Rick."

Carol stormed out with Rick in tow.

"What was that all about?" Sheila was shaking.

"I honestly have no idea. She just completely flipped her lid while Rick and I were trying to fix the door."

When Carol got back to her room she sat on her bed across from Rick.

"I don't know why you let him talk to you like that Rick. You are ten times the mechanic he is and far better looking too." She giggled. "No, seriously you are too good for this lousy place. The guys have no idea what you can do. I bet if I asked for a neck rub you'd give me one. It's unreal how all this time we've been using you to clean the disposal and your capable of..."

At first she began to panic but she realized what Rick was doing before the scream built up enough steam to get out. Rick began to rub her neck.

"You've got to be kidding me. Rick, I think I love you." She laughed and leaned back. "If I only knew you could actually listen from day one maybe this place would not hav been so bad."

Another month passed and Carol spent more and mo time with Rick. He became her best friend and confident. Sh was cheery around the station and her duties were on time for the first time in months. The rest of the crew was very impressed with the changes she made and actually began to compliment her on her new found confidence around the complex. Everything was great except for her occasional bouts with half digested dinners.

It was not long before it was time for the descent meeting. It was one of the few times over the two year span where they would get to talk to people from outside of the station. Mission control was waiting for Carol before they started. So it was more than obvious that she was late. Before she came into the room she stopped and cleaned up around her mouth. Her reason for being late was not one she wanted to explain to mission control and the sight of "soil" around her mouth might be a bit of a giveaway. She was unaware that Rick had given

away her situation long ago and that they even knew of her new found friendship after his last download.

"Okay crew, now that we are all here I'd like to congratulate you on a successful mission as of this point. Things are right on schedule and we are beginning to set up the debriefing stations and analysis center. We have the lab set up to dismantle and study Rick's systems for wear and tear. We think that so far he has been a...." He was cut off by a screech.

"You can't just tear Him apart like some useless machine!" She leapt up and stormed out. The meeting had just begun but she was gone. No one chased her and she did not care. She grabbed Rick and went to sulk in her room. It was a couple of hours before anyone came around. And to her surprise it was Sheila at her door.

"Carol, are you ok?"

"No!"

Carol let her in. Rick was in the corner sorting fibres by colour. Carol went back to her bed and curled up with her knees in her arms and started to cry again.

"I don't understand, Carol. He's a machine. They need to take him apart to make sure that the next model will last for years and years on a mission like this. The whole point of this was to study Rick and us."

"Fat lot of good I was. I spent most of the time puking. And Rick isn't just a machine. He's my friend. When you guys were all too busy looking down your noses at me he listened. He held my hair when I was sick and he took care of me when I was down."

Sheila handed her a tissue. "Carol, soon we'll all be home again. I know it seems like Rick listened, but he's just a robot. He's all programming. He doesn't do anything he isn't told to. You'll be okay. Just give it some time. Maybe they'll let you keep a few pieces of him as a memento when we exit the program."

"Yeah, maybe." She sobbed a bit and then faked a smile. She didn't really feel any better about things but she wanted Sheila out of her room so she played along. Her ploy worked and Sheila finally left.

"Rick, I wish you could make all this go away."

It was a few weeks later when the crew was gathering for a last meal together before the descent back to earth. Carol finished cooking up some of the finest grub you can make out of left over rations. Just as she sat down, she paused.

"Hey, guys? What about Rick? He's part of the crew. He should be here."

Nobody would speak up against it. They knew of her volatile attitude when it came to Rick. She left the tray on the table and left after most of the crew nodded and smiled back. Once she was gone the unanimous decision that she had lost it was made.

"Seriously, can you believe her? She spends hours in her quarters with that thing." RJ was one of the science officers. He was quite put out by Carols "hogging" of Rick. He ended up doing a lot of the final analysis of his work without Ricks help. "What do you guys think she programmed him for?"

Sheila put her glass down after just about choking on her Tang. "C'mon guys that's just gross. It's a robot! Uh, you guys smell that?"

"FIRE!" Harry yelled as he looked back at the kitchen. "Let's get out of here before the system opens the hatches and to put the fire out!"

The group of them rushed the door. When they got there they could not open it. The screwdriver was missing. Their only hope was to page Carol, but they did not need to. They could see here through the portal of the door holding the screw driver with a smile on her face. It was the last sight for the few

close to the door when the air was sucked from the room by the inky blackness of space.

Carol wandered around the station looking for Rick. When she found him he was in the control room performing the descent routine.

"Rick, you don't have to do this. We are free! The hydroponics lab will support me for years and the recyclers won't be strained a bit with just me and you here."

She hung on him but he went about his work as though she was not there.

"Rick, stop it this instant! It's just you and me now, don't you understand! They are going to tear you to pieces if we go down there! Stop it!" She was screaming herself hoarse, but it did not change Ricks pre-programmed routine one bit. Tears ran down her face as she tried to pull him away from the command unit. She slipped and fell back just in time to watch Rick do the one thing everyone thought they were needed for. Pushing the button.

Once he was done he plugged himself into his stasis unit and locked himself down. Carol was on her knees crying and screaming. The station was essentially a giant ship, and it began it's return to earth. Carol ended up locked in the command room with no restraints and was pretty beat up by the rough ride and hours of crying.

When the door to the module opened, mission control was standing there with some policemen. She looked up from the corner where her broken body finally rested.

"Why?"

"Because, Rick is a machine. He did what he was told to do."

FOR CHANGE

It was late in January and some old friends finally made a decision to go through with what they hoped would provide them with some relief in these hard economic times. The village they lived in for the first 20 years of their lives was falling to pieces. The local magistrate all but gave up on producing anything from the mines and even the town blacksmith filled his wagons and headed for the larger cities. The rural communities were crushed and emptying out fast.

So with no work available they could only hope that adventuring would give them some income and maybe a bit of a reprieve from their current ho-hum existence. Scott was fresh from the academy. He came home to a town too poor to afford his services and spent most of his time working for free just to keep his magical talents sharp.

"I know we agreed to do this thing but what if we do have to kill someone?"

"Not all adventurers are mercenaries. Besides what do you have to worry about? You can't even handle a sword?" Marcus was always hard on Scott. He considered mages to be of the weakling category. He spent the better part of his life on the farm dreaming of grand adventures. He often hoped his friends would come around to his ideas and was now proud to have them along side while following his dreams.

"Well, I am just asking, that's all. What if we do take a job that requires this. None of us are murderers. Hell, you have never even been in a real sword fight!" Scott knew Marcus was just messing with him most of the time but he was awfully worried about some of the repercussions of the adventurer's life. Danny often told stories of how his uncle had people looking for revenge show up on his doorstep. They would do everything in their power to ruin his name just because they felt he had wronged them somehow. All too often this hatred was misplaced and was just the cost of running an effective adventuring party.

"Go ahead Danny tell him about that guy that tried everything to shut his shop down with slander and then ended up challenging him to a duel in the middle of the street."

"Why? You just did." Danny hardly looked up from his sword. He was running a whetstone over it edge in a manner of which his uncle would be proud. His uncle was a perfectionist and Danny's roots were not far from his. Notice I said, "was". Danny finished that story about the duel at that point because both his uncle and the challenger died from their wounds. Danny's uncle killed the man in the street and later "succumbed to his wounds" while hanging out in the local prison, if you know what I mean. Danny knows well the risks of this type of work.

"Guys, I've got it!" yelled Leana. "It came in the post this morning. It's addressed from a Baron Konen of Redhill. Do you know what this means?"

"Yeah, some baron is looking for fodder, replied Marcus.

"Exactly! And we got the job! I told you that ad in Barnesville would work!"

"Being some barons fodder is not exactly how I hoped to start and end my career as an adventurer, Leana." Scott was still unsure of what he was getting himself into.

"Why don't you shut up and listen to the offer of employment first," Danny accented this with a flick of the whetstone.

Leana looked at Danny. "Wow, the tics in your bed keep you up last night?"

She then cracked the seal and stepped back as dust swirled up and out from the scroll tube to form an image. Scott gasped, he knew the spell and only a select few mages were privy to this sort of thing. The baron was indeed powerful.

"Gentlemen and Lady, I have a task for you of some importance to me. Years ago I had a book taken from me and it has recently turned up. It appears that a hedge wizard is using it in the Forest of Bromir." The counts voice was melodic and he was garbed in monk's robes. The four of them looked at each other with a little amusement at the way the Baron presented himself.

"Do my robes amuse you?"

A collective gasp escaped their lips. He could see them and this was no recorded message. "This spell has a limit on time you know. So pay attention."

He cleared his throat and continued. "This horrible little mage took my book and is now sitting in a foreign land. If I went to get it, it would cause a war that I cannot justify to my people. My centennial is coming up and it must go off without a hitch. So why you might ask have I contacted a group of rookie adventurers that no one has heard of? If you can't figure it out on your own I'll tell you. Most adventures use their past exploits to gain new employment. So most of them are fairly well know and their country of origin is well documented.

"Your fine group is well... Let's say unknown and unheard of, yet."

"So, do you accept?"

Danny all but yelled, "YES!"

The others nearly fell over. In each of their minds the idea of going after a wizard was simply fear inducing.

"Good. In the bottom of the scroll tube is an arrowhead. When dropped it will always point to the book. Since he has finally opened it after all these years I can finally track it and now so can you. I expect to have that book in my possession by Saturday. Meet me south of Cathedral estates at sunrise Saturday. You will be paid 300 gold plus have the option to

continue serving for me years to come. This of course, depends on your success."

Before any of them could open their mouths he blinked out leaving the room smelling of frankincense.

"By the bells of Miranda, what the hell have we gotten into?" Scott fell into his seat.

"Only the greatest thing ever!" Markus ran around the room "Do you realize that if we pull this off we will be employed by a baron of some immense wealth!"

"If he's so rich why have I never heard of him?" Leana rang in.

"Because your so poor you've never seen money or magic like that before, that's why," Scott was shaking.

"Well I guess we better get moving. We only have three days to get the book and get to Cathedral estate." Danny put his Sword away in his scabbard and collected his meager belongings. This was the goose that laid the golden egg to him. No longer would he be telling stories of his uncle and his riches. As Marcus did he dreamed of being able to tell his grandkids someday tales of adventure.

The rest of the party nervously collected their gear and met with him a short while after at the edge of the village. The four of them stood staring at the path that would lead them to Bromir. If it were not for Marcus these four would look like a bunch of kids. On second thought they do look like kids, it just that Marcus would be the one with a glandular problem that outgrew the rest of the class.

Leana was this tiny dexterous little girl that figured out her way a round a lock or two. Once her father saw that he began top teach her everything he knew until he ran out of hands and was executed for stealing from the throne room of Reginald the Twelfth.

Scott was only slightly less effeminate than Leana. He was often mistaken for a girl and understood perfectly why. He refused to cut his hair in hopes that it would turn grey early and he would look the part of the wizard even if his repertoire of spells was as pathetic as his masculinity.

Marcus, as stated previously, was a bit of a monster. Big even for his age and at his age people stopped growing. He was nearly a foot taller then his next biggest partner in this adventure but he was slow. He was a farm boy through and through and knew his only real success would come from adventuring.

Danny was the most comical looking despite the company he held. He was stringy like poorly raised beef. He stood there wearing his uncle's old leather armour. It hung on him like a child wearing dads suit during a game of dress up. The breast of the armour had a where Scott wrote "Insert sword here" in charcoal one day. This resulted in a black eye for Scott and a hotfoot later for Marcus. He did put Scott up to it, after all.

Danny held out the arrowhead and dropped it. Sure enough it pointed straight ahead. They began their trek. For all any of them new when they looked back it would be the last time they ever saw the village.

They walked into the late evening. It was full moon but the cloud cover made it dark and humid. They could not be more then an hour or two from the woods so they set up camp. Before he turned in Danny dropped the arrowhead once more. It pointed right. Not up the path any more but into the woods. A lump formed in his throat. Sleep was meager in quantity that night. Truly, a taste of the adventurer's life for them all.

When morning broke Marcus due to his internal clock was already up and prepping the fire when he heard a guttural growl from the woods. Within it the growl there seemed to be words.

"Guys, guys. Get up, we have a problem," he whispered to the others.

"Go away! The sun isn't even up yet," Leana said as she rolled over and away.

"How dare you come into my forest!" The large white wolf sniffed the air as the group scurried for their weapons. Scott got a hand on his wand and began to chant.

"I smell Baron Konen on you. The smell of frankincense is still in your hair, humans." He stood on his hind legs and held his own staff. In one paw he had a book. Sure enough the group made the connection. "You go back and tell that baron of yours that he cannot have the book back and if he wants it he'll have to pry it from my cold, dead paws."

"I'm sorry but that is what we came for and we are not leaving with out it, you monster!"

"Marcus, are you crazy!" Scott whispered between chants. "That's a lycanthrope. He'll tear us to pieces and if he doesn't kill us we will be cursed"

"Shut up and do your job like we practiced and everything will be fine," Marcus' hand moved to his sword.

"Then you shall Die!" howled the great white beast. But before he had the chance to even cast a single spell Scott thrust his wand forward and back. An invisible carpet was pulled from under his feet. Leana leapt forward on cue and snagged the book from his paw as he stumbled back. Danny dove at his legs and cut behind his knees and the wolf finally fell backwards as Marcus drove his sword home.

The Lycanthrope lay on the ground, gasping. He looked up at the group and smiled faintly. "And they call me an animal."

Even with such a sort battle they were out of breath. It must have been the stress. Scott was trembling and looking down at the beast.

Danny looked to Scott. "I thought these things were supposed to change back when killed?"

"That's only a myth," Scott replied.

"Well at least we can make it to Cathedral estates before Friday night and stay at a fancy inn." Marcus was wringing his hands.

"And how do you expect us to pay for that?" asked Leana

"With this." Marcus pulled out a gold coin. "I've been saving it, and now that we have work coming I am not afraid to spend it on my friends."

Marcus clapped them on the shoulders, nearly breaking Scott's, and picked up his beadroll. "Let's go."

"What? No breakfast?" complained Danny, as they all grabbed their stuff and began to head out in the darkness before the sun even rose for the day.

As they walked they chatted and stumbled occasionally in the dark.

By Friday evening they were all relaxing in the inn. They had a private room and Scott decided to have a look at the book they got back for the Baron.

Leana looked over. "Do you think that is a good idea?"

"Sure is. Think of what I could learn." He flipped through the ornate pages. The book was in marvelous condition for having been in the woods. "This for example."

Scott did his best to read out the Latin that was on the page. The room smelled of fur all of a sudden. He looked up from the book and Leana was transformed into a sleek black panther. She leapt out of her chair and when Danny and Marcus turned around they screamed. She stood up and looked at her hands. They were covered in a fine fur. She was sleek and felt powerful. "What the hell did you do, Scott!"

"Wait! Don't kill me!" I can fix it. I'm just not that good at Latin."

"What?" Danny asked. "How is that even possible you're a mage"

"We didn't use Latin. We used Draconic at my school." He flipped frantically through the pages.

"Ah ha!" He began to read. It was not long before Danny noticed something weird happening. Round ears began to sprout from Scott's head and Danny recognized one of the words it was "All".

"Stop!" but it was too late. The four of them were now transformed into animal hybrids. Lycans.

A knock at the door startled them. Danny, now a wolf, padded over and sniffed at the door. Marcus approached the mousy Scott. He stood nearly three feet taller than Scott now in all his bear glory. He leaned over him and shook his fist.

Danny turned to them "It's the Baron! I can smell frankincense."

Through the door came the Baron's voice. "Gentlemen and Lady, don't you think you should let me in?"

They look at each other and opened the door. The baron entered hood down. "Well, as I suspected, you guys are animals."

"Pardon?" they said in unison.

"Well you passed the test. You are everything I need in a troupe." The baron looked up and his white muzzle broke through the front of his hood.

BACK BRUSH

ALLAN BURROWS

(The author wishes to note that the characters in this story are not humans and mature at different rates from humans. All characters are the equivalent of eighteen years of age or older.)

"Another interview?"

Smith immediately realized how insubordinate his yelp had sounded. He raised his chin and smiled. "Thank you very much, Mr. Sergeant. I'm honoured to have this opportunity!"

The older wolf gave Smith a patronizing smile. "We won't be inconveniencing you by asking for a third interview, will we? I don't want you to think we're being unfair at all."

"Oh, no sir, not at all! I'm grateful that you're still considering me for the position. I'm sure a successful company like Goodfield Mutual Life has to be very careful when selecting employees."

"That's exactly right," Sergeant said, standing. "We're one of the most successful companies in the field because we hire successful people. And only successful people; one loser on the team makes us all look bad." Sergeant stopped and watched. Smith realized in a moment that this was the end of the interview and stood as well. Sergeant offered him a big, furry hand. Smith took it eagerly. But Sergeant didn't shake his hand. He grasped it tightly instead and pulled against Smith's pull, holding the younger wolf still for a moment. He brushed at a stray lock of neck fur that was sticking out of Smith's collar. Then he patted a slight bulge in the back of Smith's suit coat where the unbrushed fur on his back pushed out a little.

"Your grades and experience are impeccable, young wolf," Sergeant said. "You have the qualifications. I look forward to seeing you at your final interview."

"Thank you, sir."

Sergeant leaned close to Smith's face. "Take care of the rest before you come, whelp," he murmured. Then he turned Smith towards the door and finally let go of his hand. As Smith was walking out, Sergeant pulled a brush from his desk and took a few totally unnecessary swipes at his own immaculate fur.

Smith booked a third interview with Sergeant's secretary. The elevator door opened almost as soon as he touched the call button. The attendant, an old wolf with grizzled but immaculately groomed fur, pushed a button for him without waiting to ask his floor. "Job interview?" the elder wolf asked.

"Does it really show that much?"

"I see everyone who works here, pretty much. I never forget a face, either. I've only seen you here once before. You went to the personnel floor then, too. It adds up. Get a third interview?"

"You don't miss anything, do you?"

"I'd better not, I'm supposed to be security!" The old wolf chuckled. "Mr. Sergeant probably got touchy with you towards the end." (Smith gave him a quizzical look.) "Third interview; they like you, but they have concerns about you. In your case, judging by the loose fur around your collar, I'd say it's because you look like a loser."

"Well, he didn't say that... Hey!" The attendant touched a button. The elevator stopped between floors. He put a hand on Smith's shoulder.

"Do you usually just leave your back fur like that?"

"Like what? Look, I can't reach it behind me..."

"And I'll bet the last time your back fur had a proper brush, your mom did it, right?"

"I... Well, I guess..."

"Have much luck in college?"

"Luck?"

"With the girls."

"I'd guessed what you meant."

"You show me your throat when you talk that way, whelp! Never mind, I know damn well you didn't. Who takes over brushing your back fur when you leave your mom's side?"

Smith glared for a moment, but the elder wolf smelled like a fight and he looked tougher than his age. The young wolf raisec his chin -- a bit -- and glanced away.

"Whoever you go to brushes your back."

"And you never found a girl to go to, otherwise your fur wouldn't be so messy now. Didn't your dad warn you to find a girl right away?"

"Well it's not that easy, is it? Just claiming a girl, they won't let you do that any more. Anyway, dad's in the navy, he wasn't home much..."

"...Which is why you don't know the rules. Now listen, whelp. This company doesn't hire losers. With your back fur unbrushed like that, you look like a loser."

"So what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Fake it."

"Huh?"

"Go get a back brush."

"But those are for losers!"

"And what do you call yourself? You don't have a girl to groom you, what do you think that makes you?" Smith felt his teeth baring, but the other wolf just looked at him levelly. He shut his mouth, raised his chin and looked away. The attendant patted Smith's shoulder, then touched a button. The elevator continued down.

"Whelp, in this world, nothing succeeds but success. Nothing but success. You're a loser because you look like one. No other reason, not as far as I can see." The elevator stopped and the door opened. "You think about that," he added.

Smith entered the next department store he came to. He asked the greeter for the men's goods section. The old bitch looked him over, sneered and directed him to an exact aisle and section on the second floor. Sure enough, that's where he walked past the store's display of back brushes; walked past because it was directly opposite the women's fashions and there were three girls standing there. He went and stood two aisles away and looked at underwear, glancing furtively at the women's section. When the coast was clear he tried again, walking as nonchalantly as he could towards the back brushes. He glanced again at the women's section; nobody was in sight. He stopped and looked at the things. The store had quite a variety of back brushes; some had natural bristles and wooden handles, others stinky synthetics. Some were carved or engraved, mainly with kindly, matronly figures, a few with attractive girls. The handles came in various lengths. A display sign showed how to judge which size he needed from the length of his forearm. He glanced towards the women's fashions again before checking his arm against the display. There were two girls there. They were staring at him. He quickly looked away. He tried to give the back brushes a

derisive chuckle; it came out more like a nervous giggle. He raised his tail high, (which at least partly hid his unkempt neck), and turned away... "Can I help you today, sir!" ...right into a salesman who seemed to have just appeared and stepped, with a slobbering grin, almost into him. Smith stumbled backwards in shock. The salesman, (whose name tag just said Rock), grabbed Smith's arm and steadied him, then forgot to let go. "Can I help you find anything today, sir?" he said, still grinning, in a voice that seemed to carry to the back of the store.

"I, I, uh..."

"I see you're looking at back brushes sir! May I show you our line of back brushes today?" Still holding Smith's arm, Rock took his elbow and held it against the display. "You'll need a size medium small one, sir!" Rock declared. By this time his grin was so wide that his tongue was lolling. Smith glanced at the women's fashions and would have bolted if Rock hadn't still been holding his arm. It looked as if every girl in the store was standing there, sniggering. "Now this is a nice back brush, sir! It has a picture of your mother on it! Isn't it nice?"

"Let go of my arm!" Smith growled.

Rock's grip tightened painfully. "Will there be anything else today, sir? You'll need a nice mirror to go with your back brush! You'll need one to see what you're doing while you brush your own back!"

By now there were gales of feminine giggles coming from the women's side. Rock was looking down his nose at Smith and positively leering. "Let go of my arm!" Smith snarled.

Rock jerked Smith's arm and turned him towards the women's fashions, then marched him down the aisle towards them. "This way, sir!" he commanded. "I'll take you to the

cashier and you can pay for your new back brush!" Rock dragged Smith to the cashier, holding the gaudy, smelly, nylon thing up for all to see. He stood in line with Smith, extolling its virtues in a good, loud voice all the time. It felt to Smith as if every girl in the store was staring and laughing. Finally, they arrived at the head of the line. Rock thanked Smith for his business, yelled back brush one more time, then shoved him into the check out counter and walked away, snickering.

"Cash or charge," the girl at the cash register said, sneering.

"I want to complain about that man..."

"Shuddup, loser. Gimmee yer wallet." Smith stuffed his wallet back into his trousers pocket as he walked stiffly out of the store, feeling like all the brushes in the world wouldn't lay his hackles down. The girl at the check out hadn't even offered him a bag; he stuffed the incriminating brush down his pant leg to hide it from the rest of the world. He noticed a tawny-furred wolf girl had followed him out. She paused behind him as he hid the brush and followed him as he walked down the street towards the bus stop. She stood beside him as he waited for a bus to come.

"Nice day," she said. Smith felt his teeth bare again; he yawned, licked his nose and closed his mouth.

"That brush won't help you," she added.

"I don't need your sympathy," he growled.

"I have none for losers," she replied, then put a hand on his shoulder as he turned to go. "But I have something that'll actually help a man who wants to stop being a loser." He shrugged off her hand, but he didn't leave. He glanced at the girl, than looked again. She was lean but curvy, with smooth, thick, tawny fur. Her eyes were dark, her muzzle slender and her sweet, little nose leather glistened. Her long, bushy tail swished behind her slowly and sensuously. She looked back at

him levelly, with confidence in her eyes. Her smile was friendly. He found himself beginning to smile back. "Your bus is coming," she said. (He'd cocked an ear towards it too.) "Or you could come and have a coffee with me and talk about what I can do that a back brush can't. There's a cafe just around the corner, I go there all the time."

"Rocky was pretty rough on you," she said, over her cup. "He had a good reason."

"Yeah?"

"The more men are losers, the more women he can choose from."

Smith snorted. "What gi... woman would want a stupid jerk like him?"

"You know the answer to that. He's strong. He's masterful. He's cute. Any girl."

"So how does that help me?"

"It helps you understand why you need me." She took a sip of coffee. "Rocky's no bigger than you. Why didn't you fight him?"

"Well... he was bigger... well, no, but... I mean, you don't just..."

"He smelled like he was in charge. He was confident and you weren't and both of you knew it because you smelled it on each other. That's why he dominated you."

"So?"

"You're kind of old to be getting your first back brush. Nice suit, by the way. What's it for?"

"Uh... the suit? Job interview."

"First?"

"Second."

"And you're getting a third interview because they have doubts about you. A pretty conservative company?"

"Goodfield Mutual Life."

"Well, not bad! And they like you, but they don't know if they want to hire you because you're groomed like a loser."

"So?"

"That brush won't help you. They'll know you're faking it because you'll still smell like a loser."

"Because I groomed my own fur instead of having my girl do it?"

She smiled and lapped up another sip of warm, milky coffee. "You're catching on," she said. "It's sad how many men don't realize it. A loser only smells like himself. A winner smells of his mate, or some girl. And that's how I can help you."

"You'd brush my back fur?"

She snickered. "A conservative company like Goodfield?" She raised her cup to her muzzle. "You'll need more than that," and she took another sip. Smith took a moment to realize what she'd said. His head dropped and his ears curled back a little.

"Why would you do that... do more than brush some loser's back fur?"

She considered her coffee. For the first time, she didn't seem as confident. "A back brush has its price," she said. "I cost more than a back brush. But I'll get the job done. It won't." Smith's jaw started to drop. He tried to put his coffee down, but had trouble finding the table; he finally had to look. Then he looked back up at her. She was still looking at her cup. "I'm more fun than a back brush," she added. "And I'll brush your back fur, too. Your whole coat, if you like."

"I can't do that!" Smith exclaimed. "Paying for it, that's... it's..."

"Cheating? That's one way of putting it, and what's a back brush if not cheating?"

"Well, I mean, back brushes are legal!"

"And whoring isn't. Neither is scent stealing, but men who want to get ahead do it."

"Wait, what? Scent stealing? What's..."

"You should read the paper, john. Some guys figure it out. They'll take brushes, knock down some girl or attack her in a gang and brush her tail. Then they brush their own coats with it. That way they get her scent on them. If they're smart or lucky they'll steal scent from a girl that nobody they care about knows. They'll smell like winners and be able to start getting ahead, hopefully long enough to get the attention of a girl who'll give them her scent willingly. If not, somebody will recognize her scent on them and wonder how it got there. Or her relatives will find them."

"That's sick!"

She snickered. She set down her coffee and looked at him levelly. "Winners," she said, "get jobs with Goodfield Mutual. Losers spend their lives flipping steaks at Dog Food for minimum wage. Or less." She reached over and took Smith's left hand in her own. Her expression was almost tender as she nuzzled it. "If you want to see how well it works, just use this hand to pay with." Then she opened her purse and took out a card. "And this is how you can find me." She took another sip of coffee, smiled at him, slipped through the tables back onto the sidewalk and walked away. As he watched her long, bushy tail swishing down the street behind her, feet stepped up beside him.

"You through?" said the waiter.

"Um... yeah... I guess so. What do I owe?"

"Eight sixty three."

"Oh. Um..." Smith took out his wallet. He looked inside and his face fell. "Um, could I pay with my bank card?"

"It's inside."

He took out his bank card and started to get up, then looked at his hands and sat back. He held up his bank card with his left hand.

"Couldn't I pay out here?" he said. The waiter looked at the card as if it was slimy. Then his nose twitched, once, twice. He looked at Smith again, this time without sneering, and took the card.

"Of course, sir," he said. "Just a minute, please." In less than a minute the waiter was back with a wireless terminal. The total was only five dollars sixty three. Smith added a two dollar tip. He carefully stowed the girl's card in his breast pocket before he left.

She knelt in front of him as she brushed his left leg. His right leg and foot were already smoothed down and a stretchy wrap sock covered his heel. She let him lean his hands on her head as she carefully applied another to his left heel. "All ready for your shoes," she said. "Did you enjoy last night?"

He started to kneel with her, but she stood instead. He gently caressed her throat with both hands and nuzzled her mouth. "You were wonderful!" he said.

"Worth my price?"

"Worth a bank loan. I told the loans manager it was to improve my job qualifications. He didn't even blink!"

She smiled and touched his nose leather with hers. "I'm glad you feel good, john. You get better every time. You're better at life, too. You don't look like a loser, smell like a loser, you hardly even act like a loser. Soon you won't need me any more." Smith's face fell at that, but the girl grinned and pulled at his shoulder. "Turn around, time to do your back fur." Smith turned. Soon his face was filled with bliss as a standard hand brush slipped through his fur and scritched his back. His tail started to wag, but she touched it and he stopped. But his face started to fall again as the brush reached his lower back.

"You never told me why you do this. I mean really why. You're smart, you're pretty, you're friendly. You could get a better job than whoring. Why?"

She sighed. "It's kind of a mission," she said. "The difference for men between winners and losers is nothing more than getting a girl as soon as they leave their moms. Some men deserve not to find one. But some guys don't learn how for some reason, some just luck out. It's not fair. So I luck them back in." She chuckled. "It's a living. And a good time."

Smith chuckled too. "Luck or f**k them back in?"

She swatted his butt cheek with the brush, making him yelp. "Now be nice to the pretty girl, she's helping you keep a good job."

"Sorry," he said, with a slight growl, as she re-brushed the spot she'd spanked. She moved quickly on to his tail.

"I'm glad you got the job with Goodfield, john. Be careful not to lose it."

"I am. It's not a big deal, though, it's what I trained for. My supervisor is teaching me things university never did. But it's nothing really new..." He stopped in surprise; she was nuzzling the base of his tail. "Is that for your scent?" She licked under his tail, just a few gentle licks with the tip of her tongue.

"I like how you smell, john." She nuzzled his tail a little more, then brushed it again. "I'm going to remember you."

"Maybe... you don't..."

"Let's get you dressed," she helped him into his shirt, underwear, trousers and shoes, careful not to muss his fur. She smoothed down his neck fur again as she closed the top button, then left him to his own tie and jacket. "It'll be the usual routine," she said, as she took her own long-handled brush to her own back fur. "I'll wait one hour after you leave, then slip out unseen. Meanwhile I can use anything in your apartment as long as I'm quiet. And the cash is in an envelope on the kitchen table, I saw it." Smith came and touched her brush.

"Why don't you let me brush your back..."

"No!" she snarled. Smith stepped back, stunned. "I brush your fur," she said. "You do not brush mine. That's the rule."

"I don't understand!"

She sighed. "John, I have to keep some distance between myself and my... customers, so they stay customers. Otherwise I couldn't move on when it's time. That's why you don't brush my fur or kiss me and you don't know my name. It's the rules."

"Do you have to move on?" She looked at him for a moment, longing in her eyes, then looked back into her hand mirror and brushed on her back fur again. "You'll see," she said. "Don't be late for work."

Smith left the coffee on the machine's hot plate, a paper cup of it in his hand, as he walked briskly down the hall from his apartment. One of the other residents, a dark-furred girl with a white-and-brown star on her forehead, was already waiting at the elevators. She glanced at him as he approached, then quickly looked away. He stood on the far side of the doors. As they stood together, he heard a little sniff from her direction, glanced at her and saw her nose twitch. Before he looked away again, he saw her looking at him as if for the first time. He managed a couple more glances before the elevator door opened; once she was looking at him, once she wasn't. But he saw her looking up and down the hall before she got on with him. He faced the doors as usual.

"Hi," she said.

He looked at her; she was smiling at him.

"Hello?" he said.

"You're from 1706, aren't you?"

He nodded. "1709?"

She nodded back, timidly. "I see you sometimes. On the elevator. You're going to work?"

He nodded. "You?"

She nodded back. "Where is it? Where you work, I mean."

"Goodfield Mutual. I just started a couple of days ago."

"Oh? That's a good company! Do you sell? Insurance..."

"No, I'm an actuarial clerk. Junior."

"That's a good job." (They smiled at each other.) "I... noticed you before. I didn't want to talk to you, in case, you know..."

"I guess you wouldn't want to be seen talking to a loser," Smith joked.

"That's right! You're... you're not a loser now, though... so...," Smith's ears dropped along with his jaw. He looked up at the floor indicator, it was just passing three.

"Um... well, maybe we could have a coffee after work some time, if..."

"There's a great little bistro two streets over!" she exclaimed. "I'll see you tonight. I guess I know where... to find you..."

The doors opened. Smith slipped out quickly, but the dark girl stayed on, smiling after him.

"Yeah, well, I'll, uh, see you then..." he managed, as the elevator doors closed. He turned away, towards the lobby door. "She saw me," he muttered, as he walked towards it. "She noticed me. But she didn't want to talk to me... because I was a loser. Now she's dragging me to a bistro. So what does that make me now?" He pulled the lobby door open. A lady with her cubs was approaching. He'd seen her before and always held the door for her so she could get her cubs through. She always ignored him. This time, as she passed him at the door,

her nose twitched. She turned to him and gave him a warning growl. She herded her cubs away from him. He watched her, astonished, his coffee forgotten in his hand. Then he turned away again, shaking his head. He looked across the driveway to the street. Its double tide of cars washed past him, as it always had. He walked quickly along it to the bus stop. He glanced nervously at every face as he went, wondering if that's how the same faces had always looked before, watching for their noses to twitch.

THE CONDITION: RED SAGA

FROSTSCAR'S STORY

"You guys will never believe what just happened!" Bob the porcupine was not even in the room yet when he started shouting. The towering Uzanti was right behind him. "Cajun's good fellow Nemet just had Thadius Effingham arrested!"

"I wanted to tell them," Uzanti groaned out.

I was blown away. Thadius had probably done something stupid like show up to Nemet's broadcast at the celebration.

"Yeah, he showed up to Nemet's gala event live broadcast and actually got on the radio!" Bob was more impressed by the fact that Thadius had actually gotten in than the fact that he'd got arrested. Truth be told, orders were to shoot Thadius Effingham on site and dump his body into the tar pits. So, it was actually kind of a relief to hear that he had been arrested.

Everyone was looking to me for an opinion on the matter but I felt it was best to pretend I knew very little about Thadius. He and I went way back. Before I took power I used to send him messages straight from the Commander's office, a tradition that continues on to this day. Soon, Cola will be in office and I will be free to do so once again. The day when I'd get out of these chains could not come soon enough.

"Hey Frost, they put him in your old cell. You know, the one in block D with windows?" Uzanti finally got a word in past Bob's narration of the event.

"You know what will be funny? If we stick Cajun in the cell next to him when all hell breaks loose tomorrow night." The room busted into tears at the thought. I often felt that they laughed at my jokes just because I was in power for a while, but over the last few months I'd grown even closer to Cola's inner circle, becoming one of them. These folks made my imprisonment in the complex of Four Points bearable and soon

I'd be able to take leave of them and finally travel to my hometown for some R and R.

Cola came into the room. "You guys hear about Effingham? Damn shame. I was really hoping to bring him in on my new news team next month. Chances are though he will be executed and tossed in the tar pits before anyone gets a chance to talk to him. It would have been great have a fur like him. He could be the next Furaldo Rivera."

The thought of that made my stomach turn. Thadius didn't work for anyone, but if he was still alive after tomorrow I was sure this would be presented to him as a condition of his release. Just maybe, I could get to him before Cola did.

The rest of the day flew by. Before we knew it the charity event was here and the crowd was electric. Cassie and Cajun were beaming with pride and had no idea what was about to unfold. I had been running errands for both groups for the last 48 hours and the amount of silliness was reaching peak level. I would be delivering secret messages for Cajun to the very people that were going to overthrow him, while holding copies of manifests that detailed the entire list of attendees at the gala affair. At one point I was right in front of Cajun holding the go orders for the take over and he said to me. "Y' know, Frost? I think everything is going to be alright."

He had just heard of Thadius Effingham's arrest. I almost broke out into laughter. I didn't, of course; I had to keep my eye on the prize, freedom. Helping Cola was going to help me attain that goal.

As things wrapped up and the closing ceremony began I gave the signal. Cajun's forces within the room were all but taken down, with Tyler being the only holdout. We knew that he would not really start shooting once he saw the numbers were in Cola's favor. He was far too smart for that. The look on Cajun's face was almost worth a year in prison. As usual, anger welled up and his muzzle folded back. He was biting at us. Tyler managed to jockey a position that allowed him and

Cajun to back out of the room. Cola let them leave. It appears that I would be the only victim of cell block D.

Cola would have liked to arrest every one of them but I reminded him of the leniency Cajun had shown him. It has everything to do with the opinion of the furs in this land. Toss the dictator, not the administration; they are just doing their job.

When all was said and done the real party began. Cola hosted a gala affair of his own. He talked about privatization of public holdings so that everyfur could prosper in this great land. He had great hopes of promoting the arts and culture of Four Seasons. And then he dropped the bomb. I was not to go free.

I think the look on my face said it all. I was crushed. I would be allowed to roam the complex as I had been before but Cola obviously felt threatened by my connection to the furs of this land. So, once again my dreams were flattened like squirrel crossing an expressway.

It was not long after that, that I contacted Potoroo. "Hey, Potoroo."

"What's up, Fuzzface?" I hated that name but under the circumstances I was prepared to deal with it.

"I think I have some information you might want."

"Really? You want to help me? Why the hell would you want to do that?"

He was shocked when I told him about Cola's announcement. He had appropriate outrage. . . at least from my point of view.

"If my gut tells me right, he's probably down in cell block D. He was all but foaming at the mouth for an opportunity to skin Thadius Effingham. I'd radio him and see how that is going. He is probably unaware of the increased security and is

probably going to get caught up in it when he tries to get out. I am heading there now. When you see me come out of the block with Thadius he should be away from the wall and you'll be able to blow it and get him out. I'll see you around eleven o'clock. Head east to his lands. It should be a while before Cola can get the word out that way about the change in government."

"Y' know Frost, maybe I had you pegged all wrong. Take care, and thanks." Potoroo hung up the phone. He was probably the best thing I had going for me at the moment. Even with all the insanity he was predictable and I could depend on his rescue of Cajun to be spectacular. It would be sure to take the focus away from Thadius getting out. The last thing I wanted was for him to be stuck on the inside with me and at this point none of Cola's administration knows what he looks like yet.

My next step was Cassie. Once I found her it became very apparent how much she loved Cajun. She was already planning to fight back against cola's forces. She did not have the info I had and it was apparent there would be a lot of unnecessary death and mayhem. She had Nemet and Tyler leading the charge while Rozberk and company attempted to distract the guards. Problem was it was during a change in the guards and there would be nearly double the normal numbers there.

"Cassie, leave it to me." I said it as sincerely as possible.

"You? Are you nuts? I can trust you just about as far as I can throw you!" She wasn't thinking with her head and her heart only knew one thing about me, doubt. She was there for all the times I spat at Cajun in disgust. She knew I was still mad and most of all she knew I had participated in his ousting.

"I can do this for you. I have gained nothing from his loss of power. I spent a year trying to get him out in hopes of being freed and now I'm still locked away here at Four Points. So, please Cassie, go east. Cajun, will be there, I promise."

She hung up the phone without another word. I don't know if she believed me or not. Only time will tell.

When the time came I have to admit I was surprised. Cajun wasn't foaming at the mouth trying to kill Thadius through the bars but instead talking with him in a civil manner. I opened the cell and let Thadius out right in front of Cajun and Tyler. The look of confusion on his face was a perfect follow up to the look of shock he had hours earlier. Cajun pulled his gun but I warned him that the guards above were now waiting for him to make his leave. He let us go. He and Tyler began to plot their escape from block D. I can still hear Tyler berating him over the stupid idea of exacting revenge on Thadius before they left. The dull thud of the explosives was like music to my ears. For me it meant the beginning of a new plan for freedom.

I would not leave with Thadius Effingham. I was needed here to feed him just as I had in the past. He will write th stories of this land and will infuriate Cola into making mistake just as he had done with Cajun. I will be free again and so wil the people of Four Seasons.

CAJUN'S STORY

"Can you f**king believe that?" Potoroo's pink Mohawk fluttered in the breeze and bounced with the motion of the jeep. "The whole side of that building came down!"

"And nearly killed me and 10 of the prisoners! It was bad enough trying to escape from my own compound, but having to get away from the very prisoners I put in there. . . sucked." I wasn't really mad at Potoroo and his boys. I was still kind of in shock from the whole thing. It had been an incredible few hours. I did not expect to be on the run and could hardly make heads or tails of what to do next. The worst part of this whole scenario was coming to grips with the idea that the cook had ousted me.

Seriously, I did not see it coming.

"So, where are we going?" He was screaming to get his voice heard over the roar of the jeep's tires. I wasn't really sure where to go. The biggest problem I was having in this situation is that I had no idea how long it was going to take for the forces to start listening to Cola. It could be just a few minutes before he gets a helicopter into the air or hours of him arguing with several of my troops about how he is in charge now. I could only hope that the members of the Spirit Drinkers on base would give him as little cooperation as possible until they find out where I am and leave.

"Go to Furman Air Field. Let's hope that word of what has happened has not gotten there yet."

"Sounds good to me." Potoroo took the next corner at breakneck speed. The tires groaned and two of them felt as though they were leaving the pavement. In the frantic rush I forgot all about Cassie. When all hell broke loose at the end of the celebration she had disappeared into the crowd. "Hey, have any of you guys heard from Cassie?"

"No, but it's rumoured she grabbed Xaber and Rozberk and is on her way to the eastern provinces. Maybe she figures they're safe there."

"Well, she is the Queen Bee out that way. Never mind the airfield, let's head straight east. If we take a plane they will know exactly where we are going." I was still unsure of what to do. Usually, I have plans and ideas weeks in advance. Running on the fly like this with no communication was a tough act. I just wish I'd had some time to sit and think about how I was going to deal with this situation as a whole.

With all the bouncing around and the occasional wooting from the fellows in the back it was hard to think. My mind wandered to my short time talking with Thadius in his cell.

I had Tyler's gun point blank in his face and he stood firm. This was Thadius Effingham. I could not leave until I found out why he did the things he did, but that was going to be tough to do. My finger rather liked the idea of squeezing the trigger.

"You know, you could have avoided this," said the oversized wolf in the cell before to me. I had no idea who he was or where he came from but somehow he knew pretty much everything that was going on.

"What the hell do you know?" I was not really in any kind of mood for some ass to be giving me a lecture on what I did wrong.

"Well I do know that if someone was constantly writing about my inadequate security measures and unhappy soldiers within the ranks I'd pay attention."

I had about enough. "Listen here, a**hole! You were a f**king resistance sympathizer and can go f**k yourself. The only thing you ever really knew was how to get on my bad side."

"I tried to warn you! How many times was I able to sneak onto base? Seven, eight? If you had increased security in the right places you would have caught Cola in the act. Instead you throw a party and give him the keys to the kingdom!" I fell back from the bars in shock. Here he was, right in front of me for the first time. In my prison and I could not get my hands around his neck. "And now you people have to deal with a capitalist pig that plans on tearing down everything you worked so hard for!"

He wasn't screaming at me but his voice was cutting through me. "How the hell do you know all this?"

"The same way that I know everything about you."

"But you don't sound like you support Cola. The tone you are using tells me that you don't like him any more then you like me. . . " I was very confused. If he did not like Cola why did he help overthrow me?

"I am a man for the people. I may not like the Communist government you put forth but you did a lot of good. The schools have never been better, and realistically the people of

this country were in fine hands. Capitalism scares me. It offers too much to those who have the money and not enough to those that don't. We were in good hands and my articles were meant to keep the people's wits about them, and to keep them fighting for what was right. One tradition this land has always had was to not punish those that press hard on the government. You showed us that it was still a strong belief when you pardoned Potoroo."

My anger was subsiding. I think that I may have misunderstood this wolf. I was too busy worrying about the people's opinion to see that he was pointing out my faults for me, not them. If I had read his paper as an advice column rather than a scathing review I might not be in this position.

"So, Thadius, whatever do you and your infinite wisdom propose I do now?" I have to admit the level of sarcasm was far beyond anything I had ever expressed before.

"You're still the leader of the Spirit Drinkers, right?" He gave me a huge grin. "Don't let Cola have this place without a fight. Keep up the traditions you and your people have always had. I know why you wanted power. You believe you are the rightful rulers of Four Seasons. Don't do it for power this time. Do it for the people and they will love you for it. Trust me. It worked for Frost, didn't it?"

As he said this Frostscar walked in. He had the keys to unlock Thadius' cell.

"Cola is letting him out?" I was shocked.

"Nope, I am." Frost grinned. "I wanna make sure a building doesn't fall on him."

"What?"

"You see what you are unaware of is that Cola has already changed the guards rotation and there are several dozen of them waiting for you upstairs. And since you designed Cell Block D with only one exit you are going to have to make another one."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" The two of them left together. I was stiff with anger. The whole time Frost must have been the one feeding Thadius Effingham his information. I still have no idea how he was getting it out of Four Points but I am certain it was all him now.

Before I knew it the jeep's brakes slammed on and shook me from my daydream. I wasn't so angry at Frost and Thadius at this point. From Frost's statements he must have known that Potoroo was going to get me out of there and he never said a word to Cola's forces about it. I guess he's not happy with being a prisoner, still. But why doesn't he just leave the same way Thadius did?

When I looked up dozens of grins looked back. It was Cassie and two dozen of my best men and friends at that. I might not be in power at the moment but something told me I'll be back there again.

COLA'S STORY

I was nervous, very nervous. In two hours I would be making my move to overthrow Cajun's Red Faction government. We were all hoping this would be a bloodless coup but no one really knows whether that is even possible. One mistake could lead to a firefight in a room full of people. Not something I wanted. What I want is a new era for this land. An era where the people have the industries and businesses in their hands and their hands alone. No more government interference when it came to the daily lives of the people.

I closed the door behind me so that I could have some time in private with my closest friends. They would be the people behind the power very soon and I wanted to give them a pep talk. I sent Frostscar on some ridiculous errands in hopes of keeping him busy for a while.

"Well guys, it's almost time. Soon, Frost will give the sign for the troops to take action. If things go smoothly we have a lot to look forward to. Bob, Uzanti, you guys did great work. Frost has no idea of our real plans. He's been to busy worrying about Thadius Effingham to pay attention to the big picture. If he freaks out when I announce that he is not going free, toss him in the same cell with Cajun. That should just about kill two birds with one stone. If he takes it like a man, we'll let him be."

"Okay, now why is it he's not going free?"

"Good question. Fact is he holds too much sway with the people. If I am going to hold onto this government I have to keep him in check and I cannot do that if he is out roaming the countryside. You know, a 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer' kind of a deal."

"Well, you're the boss." Uzanti was probably just as skeptical as the rest of the crew. I knew it was a bad idea to let someone with his kind of influence be free to air his opinion. Frost had obviously used his charm to sway some of my own men. He was terrible leader but the people loved him anyways. Who knows what he is capable of? I'd much rather have him under my thumb.

"Once we have Cajun in our jail, I want the party to continue on. The folks on the inside will know what has happened, and in the morning we will announce it to the rest of the country via the media services that Cajun has already put in place. When the people get the message that way they will assume it is a peaceful transition. Let's keep them thinking that if possible."

I took a deep breath. "Okay guys, let's head out to the auction and closing ceremonies. Good luck."

I think it may have been the longest walk of my life. It was not more than a couple of hundred meters but it felt like I

had just crossed the desert in hopes of finding the Promised Land. When I was in view of the doors I began to shake. The guards stood at attention and saluted me. Secretly many of them hated it. I was "just the cook," after all. I saluted back and marched in. So far, so good.

Once inside I could see Frost standing next to Cajun. His muzzle was down and his ears were back. When in Cajun's presence he always played the omega. If he didn't it would be a night back in the cell for him. I hoped, despite his captivity, I could relieve him of these fears. He is, after all, an integral part of this plan. I may not be setting him free but I do appreciate all the risks he has taken.

During the auction the crowd cheered and laughed. It was a great time. Kamber was swooning them with her charm and they were opening up their wallets and helping out the cause. I really didn't participate much, as I was too worried about giving up the goods early.

At one point I almost abandoned the plan. The vibe in the room was just too great. I was afraid that my men would not be able to break the Spirits' hold on the room fast enough to avoid a major conflict. But any thoughts of that were washed away once Frost raised his hand with a red folder in it.

It was fast-so fast I almost missed it myself. Before I realized it I had brought my gun up and Cajun's eyes were wider than the headlights on his motor coach. His teeth rapidly became his dominant feature. Tyler, of course, had managed to avoid being taken down. He was a tough one. But his toughness was not to be outdone by his smarts and he played his cards well. He got between Cajun and my pistol. Pulling the trigger would cause a cascade of madness. He and Cajun backed out of the room and took off. When my men went to chase I stopped them. My heart hurt enough just tossing him

from power. The witnesses in this room were enough for me to gain a total grip on the reigns.

Frost last words of the night to me were wise indeed. "Don't make the same mistake Cajun did and arrest too many of his men. The furs of this land are fickle and will anger when you go against our traditions. It has always been the way of the people to not crush the workers, but instead show them an open hand and take them with you when the balance of power changes."

I think he was trying to make sure he would be set free. But he spoke the truth about our fine land. It was the despot who would be tossed. If the workers on his administration are punished for his actions they will never support me. So I took his advice and let several go as an act of sympathy for the people.

Once the room was cleared the celebration continued as I had planned. The rush of euphoria was nearly overwhelming. During my speech the people were enthusiastic for my plans and I beamed with pride. I could hardly have asked for things to go better. I do have to admit, though, that it was a good deal of fun watching Frostscar squirm when I announced that he would not be going free. Maybe, just maybe, there was more to Cajun keeping him around other than pure necessity.

That evening, once the party was over, I took a trip up to my new office. I had been waiting to sit in this chair for nearly a year now. I figured I'd celebrate with a few sips of brandy and look out over my newly acquired Complex. I stood briefly at the window and understood why so many times in the past I would catch Cajun or Frost standing here. The view was great and it gave you a feeling of power as you looked down over the yards. During the day troops would be running drills, but for now it was quiet. A few drunken furs were staggering across the square.

All was fine until a pink Mohawk came into view. The fellow was not drunk at all. It was a ruse. Potoroo began to run from the wall of cellblock D. The explosion that followed sent debris in all directions. The bay window before me was shattered by a brick the size of a basketball.

When I got up, I knew it was too late. Chances were, this was Cajun's doing. It was most likely that Thadius Effingham was killed in the blast. Woefully, my hopes of things going smoothly were washed away.

CHAZMAS

It was bright, very bright for a tavern. Most times taverns did not turn the lights up this high, but this was a special occasion. A town meeting was called on this very cold winter evening. Most of the patrons were not all that used to the idea of being able to see what the others looked like and many surprised eyes were passed around the room as some of them were beginning to realize who their friends really were.

"Angus, wait... You're my neighbor! And I've spent the last year poisoning your petunias!"

"You Bastard!" Angus replied, while cocking a fist! "I've had to replant those six times!"

But before a fight could break out the gavel was brought down and the room silenced abruptly as if a spell were cast. The mayor stood before them-all five feet of him, anyway- swinging the gavel over his head while puffing out his chest. His stature, despite being propped up on the counter, looked even less impressive than normal. It was as though he shrunk when worried.

He began to announce the meeting's purpose. The crowd listened intently to every word that left his mouth. They, too, were worried. Not just about themselves, but about the town as a whole.

"My fellow countrymen and ladies, it is my duty as mayor of this fine town we all share to inform you that the dragon has handed down his list of demands again this year. In that list he is asking for 12 casks of ale, 11 horns of mead, 10 bottles of brandy, 9 fairies prancing, 8 ripe cows, 7 flanks of lamb, 6 large turkeys, 5 Golden wings, 4 boxes of turtles (real, not the chocolate kind), 3 layer cakes, 2 bolts of silk, and a virgin dressed as a schoolgirl."

"What?" yelled the crowd, nearly in unison.

"I know, I know, the dragon's demands get weirder every winter. We all figured it was a little odd when he started asking for Smarties, but no brown ones. Now, if we all work together we can fill this list and get it out of our hair for yet another year."

The door to the tavern opened and closed with nearly absolute silence. At the back of the room the tips of wings could be seen just above the heads of those attending the meeting. The mayor, however, was too short to notice any of this.

"I'll give out this list to everyone here, and I am asking that each of you list your contribution and hand it in by the end of the day tomorrow."

A few hands popped up in the crowd, waving about like those of children needing a bathroom break while in class.

"Why don't you just kill him?" A powerful yet light voice called from the back of the room. The crowd turned to face it and mouths dropped. They all stood in silence at the sight of a rare Draconis Smilodon Fatalis. She was sitting at a table in a leisurely manner, as though she belonged there and had always been.

"Do I have to ask again?" The light glimmered on her smooth coat, displaying all of her splendid colours. Her grin was playful but the teeth behind it reflected the seriousness of her statement.

"Well... Uhm... *gulp* you see we don't have the resources to deal with the uhhh... beast."

"Oh, don't worry; I will not be offended." Chazore (as she was known) was more than aware of the eyes that leered at or feared her. The ones that stared hungrily were her favorite kind. It was easy to direct them to what needed to be done. The ones that feared her were not so easy to handle. Despite her proven track record they were far too untrusting to deal with on the same level as the others.

"Oh, well in that case we would love to slay that fat bastard. He's been nothing but a thorn in our side since we amalgamated the four villages into one town. But he is far too powerful for us to handle. We have even tried Slayers and the result was the aforementioned Smarties order the following year."

Chazore stood up and strutted regally toward the mayor. "Well, perhaps you'd like to make some kind of trade, then? I will stop the harassing dragon and you'll hold an annual feast in my name instead."

The mayor immediately began to pace and stutter. "But... But... I don't think I have the authority to make that decision on the spot, so I am going to have to say no."

The crowd rumbled. Shouts began to pour out like a tipped bucket. "Your whole council is here, ASS!" was shouted from the back.

"OK, OK! All those in favor of spending all our money every year on a feast rather then the dragon's coffers say aye!"

Chazore's eyes went wide and then she began to sneer at the mayor. Something was up with this fellow. She had a feeling there was more to this than this room was aware of. "I highly doubt an annual party will be the same cost as the list you rang off sir! Maybe, just maybe the annual feast will rival the amount of food you have for dinner!"

She poked at him and he did not giggle. He was very cross, angry even. His belly popped out of his pant top when Chazore prodded it. He was fighting to re-tuck his marbled silk shirt. Once his mission was accomplished he called for the vote to be cast again.

Almost unanimously the crowd was in favor of an annual feast rather then feeding the dragon's coffers. The mayor seemed rather put out.

"Seems you don't like the idea of saving the town from this dragons wrath, mis-ter mayor?" Chazore's playful grin cut through him.

"No, that's not it at all." His charm and charisma were beginning to run out. He was angry about something and Chazore could see it. But he was bracing his walls and turning on his political powers. "I am not one to trust the arrival and demands of a dragonesque beauty at the drop of a hat. I'd rather rely on the evils I know rather then the ones I don't."

He looked up and down Chazore with arched eyebrows. "Do what you can. Go find the dragon and feed yourself to it but I hardly doubt you're virgin material."

"Oooh, is the mayor jealous that my breasts are perkier than his? I find it odd. The only time I get such looks of disapproval is when wives catch husbands staring lustily at my quarters."

The mayor left in a huff. The room cheered and a group of men picked Chazore up and paraded her around the bar, with only the occasional attempt at a grope. The rest of the evening flew by. Chazore enjoyed a few drinks on the house and got to know a few of the locals better. It was a rather quaint town filled with the standard good fellows with a mix of corrupt political adversaries. The people who lived here were happy but poor. Most money went to taxes as was the norm and the dragon's demands were hitting many of them hard.

By the end of the night, most of the folks in the tavern were certain that Chazore was on the up and up. They liked her for her candid demeanor and once they were capable of eye contact they fell for her charm. She ended the night with a toast.

She reached into her satchel, removed a gold coin, and placed it on the bar.

"To new friends!" She then threw her glass into the fireplace. The rest of the room followed suit.

The following morning the town was bustling with activity. Folks on the street greeted her with warm smiles and a pair of husky pups followed her from stall to stall as she investigated the market. She was beginning to notice that not much of what was offered here were things of interest to dragons and the more she thought about the list the weirder it seemed.

By the time she left to search for the dragon it had begun to snow. She left a light trail of padded prints behind her as she walked away from the town. She could be heard mumbling to herself. "Hmmm, maybe Chazoresday or Chazmas sounds nice too."

It was a few days later when the town learned of her fate. The market rumbled as a large purple dragon landed. He had a fiery grimace and yellow highlights. Beside him he placed a rather large bag on the ground.

"Where is my ransom and that lousy mayor?!" He screamed, nearly knocking over the three nearest stalls.

The townsfolk scrambled and gathered the entire list of twelve incredible items except the virgin. No one in town would give up their son or daughter. The faeries, however, were locked up in pet carriers and mad as all get out. They rocked them back and forth and the townsfolk had to put the lamb on top of the crates to stop them from rolling away.

The snow was nearly two feet deep in some areas, which would have been up to his rotund waist had the mayor been walking. Instead he was being carried.

"Is this what I get for taking care of this lousy town?" he cried.

They gathered around so he could not run away; he would in all likelihood not get very far. The dragon eyed him up and down and flicked his tongue.

"So, you are the pitiful man that sent a dragon slayer for me?" He snorted some flame and melted the snow around him. "And all this stuff? What would I do with fairies?"

"Oh, great dragon! It... t'was not I who hired the slayer. It was the folks of the town of whom voted on it." He stuttered and wiggled in place. Even in the cold sweat began to run past his temples and down his chins.

"Gather everyone in town." The dragon sat on his hindquarters and looked down at the bag. When the rest of the town had arrived it was like a small earthquake had broken out. The ones that were not trembling were shaking in the cold. The dragon untied the bag and reached inside.

Suddenly the eyes of the mayor and those of the entire town grew to the size of saucers. Chazore with a red cap adorned with white fur stepped out of the bag. She stepped forward and grabbed the mayor by the ear.

"I have never seen such a fat greedy dragon before!" She picked him up and kicked him in the back of the pants with such force that he crashed into the stack kennel crates and lamb. The fairies busted out and began to pinch and poke at him. His stubby legs began to move as fast as they could carry him. "Stay away from my friends or I'll feed you to the dragon!"

It was not long before the town clued in as to what happened. The mayor had been taking them for a ride for years. They were all but kept poor by the demands while the mayor got richer and fatter every winter. They had Chazore and her purple friend Xzion to thank for liberating them from this annual terror. So that day they feasted on what would have been the mayor's bounty. They sat together in the inns and schools and enjoyed a celebration, and Angus even found it in his heart to forgive his neighbour for poisoning his petunias.

TRANSPOCOLIPS PATHWAYS PART TWO

After twelve hours of hard travel by car, the professor was so weary that he could barely keep his head up. Even though his body bounced around in rhythm with the car, his head was losing its ability to hold itself in line with the rest of his bobbling ragged body. He eventually fell asleep, despite his extreme desire to be alert for the merest possibility of interaction with the law.

His mind, mostly frozen in deep thought, fell to the side. It was a steep hole and the crash landing at the bottom was hardy and fruitful in noise. His daughter was the first of the human transformed. Karenroo had just recently become aware of her true nature and had just revealed to him how deeply she reveled in the love of oneself. But he was certain that this next evolutionary step would not be so welcome by all. He looked up from the hole and only felt loss.

He himself would most likely be immune to the effects of the virus. Part of its structure came from him and he had to perform preliminary tests on himself. After years of testing his body had most certainly developed immunity. Some humans would not evolve; he was sure of that. How few was the question. How will society adapt. He could only hope that it would be as enthusiastic as Eric was. The poor kid had basically been hijacked from his train, both of thought and literally. His job as a signalman was over. He was now a fugitive, but being completely enamoured with his daughter, he hardly noticed.

When the drive had first started, Karen barely said fifteen words. After six hours of adoring eyes and returned muted glares disguised as coy smiles she finally let loose a groan. Ten minutes later she straightened up in the seat and said, "How long have you had to wear the ugly uniform?"

Eric's head dipped briefly with a bump in the road. The smile cut across his face and he shyly confessed to his hatred of the throwback uniforms. The red cap and suit made him look like a doorman at a fancy Penning St. Hotel. Perhaps

Hunningburgs, the luxury suite king logo, could even find a place to be displayed over his right breast if he needed. He often gestured to his puffing pectoral muscle. He was built like an over inflated balloon. He did his best to puff his chest and broaden his shoulders at any glance from her. He looked far better when his sinewy musculature was put forth as his prime quality.

After that point they chatted like two college kids on a road trip. Old stories were passed back and forth and the two of them often found each other gasping in disbelief at each other's wild antics. This perhaps was professor Jitny's only thread of hope for the future. Surely he was doomed to be imprisoned, or even killed on sight, but his legacy would touch every human on this planet. The virus in its airborne form was particularly nasty. He was certain the number of infected was already climbing.

All these thoughts faded from his mind as he fell asleep despite the rough drive.

"You know, Karen, I think we should have stolen a better car." Eric spat out as his head whipped from the succession of bumps

"Next time I'll pick a pink Cadillac just for you, mini-Elvis. For now we need something good on gas. We don't want to waste time filling up every four hundred kilometres. Every time we do that people see us and we can be reported back to the authorities." Karen spoke with certainty. Her sheltered life had left her with nothing but time to train and study. She was brilliant but had no skills in dealing with people. She was not really prepared to be a criminal, but she had a mind that was sharp and could work out the way things would be best-or so she hoped. She was good as muscle and some quick wit but for real underground work, they had no one to depend on. They were headed to her uncle Marty's place and she was not too sure if that was a good idea. It was relatively under the radar, but she had no idea what rules the police would break when

trying to find them. For all she knew they might be there, waiting for her.

"Why are we going to your uncle's place? That place is probably full of cops by now." Eric said, almost presciently. He was an innocent, for the most part. The worst thing he had ever done before this was not cover his mouth when he sneezed. It was his sudden enamouration with Karen that had dragged him from his safe and mundane existence. Okay, maybe it was not sudden but her appearance in his life was unexpected. Who would have guessed that Karenroo would pop into his world and his heart with such gusto? He hoped but never thought it could actually happen. He was often shunned if he mentioned the way he felt about her. It is taboo for a human to "love" a transformed species, and for good reason too. The invasive viruses that caused most damage often came from jumping species. No one knew what would happen if transformed species and humans freely interacted.

The speed of the car crept up without notice. A rise in the road hid the trail from view. The hold gravity held on the car was at its weakest when Karen saw the ambush. It was not the police but instead a gang of transformed. They were armed heavily and had a barricade made up of an old earth scraper parked across the path where the trees narrowed. This was not unusual in these parts, but not something Karen had anticipated dealing with today.

Under most circumstances a car would have been able to stop in time to avoid hitting the giant piece of steel they had parked across the road. But the speed Karen was driving at turned this into an impossible task. The tires dug deep into the soft path and dragged it of off center. The front corner dug in deep and she could feel the rubber of the tire give out just before they made contact with the scraper. The scraper won the battle immediately. Karen was notorious for not wearing her belt and was catapulted into the windshield of the car. It had little resistance to her 250 lb frame of muscle. Her dense fur protected most of her from the tiny cuts the glass would have made, but her ear did not fare so well.

The blunt trauma from the initial collision rendered her unconscious for the remainder of the flight. Her landing was hard, but she was ok. The professor was now awake and very confused from the shock, while Eric was all but unconscious. He was dazed and the wind was knocked out of him. Even if he was capable of doing something, he would suddenly be unwilling. This was entirely due to the fact the majority of the space around him was now occupied by knife wielding horses.

"Well chump, what do you got that we want?" said a particularly nasty looking character.

He was thick and tall. Many transformed species were picked for their brute strength, and this fellow was no exception. Eric was terrified; he shook as he gazed over the horse's scarred body. One of the largest scars was directly over where the control implant would have been. They were outlawed years ago for cruelty reasons, but this fellow was old enough to have lived under the thumb of a mining company at one point or another.

"You leave him alone, you big jerk! You could have killed us!" The professor was sounding rather aggressive. Eric did not know better, but this was highly out of character in the opinion of those who knew him well.

The horse turned his gaze onto the frail old man in the back seat. "You, sir, have some kind nerve, talking to me like that. The only reason I didn't already kill you is the fact that you were travelling with a roogirl, and I would like to know why before I have that little bit of pleasure."

His voice was deep and powerful. The professor knew of these types of gangs and rarely would anyone be left alive after an encounter. At this moment, he felt like his world was only a short distance from the end.

He spoke carefully this time. "Mister... Uh?"

"Haden Knealton."

"Well, you might want to hear about more than just my daughter's reason for travelling with me."

"Pardon?" his ears went flat.

"Yes, Mr. Knealton. I am Professor Jitny ,and my friend and I are now on the run from police, and pretty much all government branches, essentially. We don't have much that is of use to you physically, but instead we could use your help."

"This ought to be good. Why would I help you, even if you are professor Jitny? The only favour you could have done me would have been to help outlaw the restraining devices before they got to me." In truth, the professor was one of many that helped fight against the use control implants. He was considered to be a great and powerful activist in the name of equal rights for all sentient beings, transformed or not.

"Well, the reason we are on the run is because if my estimations are correct, humans will be the minority in less than a year's time. This, of course, is my fault. But before I go into this further, perhaps you could help my daughter a bit before she bleeds to death?"

Haden looked very carefully at the professor. He was unsure of whether he really was who he claimed to be or not, but nonetheless was curious as to what he was talking about. Under the circumstances Haden thought it might be better to move ahead with caution. "Okay then, boys, grab them nice like and get us out of here for now. We may have bigger business."

His comrades worked like a well-oiled machine, and before anyone could object the three of them were placed in the scraper's bucket and everything was cleared from the road. The only sign that anyone had been there were a few cubes of glass that sparkled in the sun as they drove away.

The professor was moved up to the cab after a short bit. He and Haden were chatting for a long time. Eric was holding Karen on his lap and applying pressure to the cut on her ear. Even though it was not life threatening, it was bad. Three

quarters of her ear was more than likely lost. He was very worried.

Karen's eyes opened to the sight of Eric's tear-filled face. By this point he was sobbing slightly.

"Oh shit, did I die?"

Eric gasped. "Thank god you're okay! Well, relatively speaking. How's your head?"

"Killing me, and it feels like we are riding in a giant wheelbarrow. What the hell? Where is the professor?" she bolted up wincing at the pain as her ears last bit of connective skin tore off and it fell to the ground before her. "What the fuck!"

She bent down and picked up the piece of her ear. With her other hand she felt the leftover stump. It was cut at a diagonal. She turned to Eric with tears in her eyes. "Why hasn't the professor at least tried to sew it back on?"

"We've been taken hostage by a trangang. The professor has been talking with their leader in the cab for the last twenty minutes."

Karen grabbed for her guns but felt unholstered air in their place. She reached up for the hatch and found it locked tight. Looking about their prison her heart sank. Nothing inside this place was suitable for use as weapons or implements of freedom. Thinking the worst, she slumped. But as her flanks hit the floor the hatch unlocked and swung open. Before she even had a chance the professor's head popped in with a grin.

"See, Karen, violence isn't always needed to get us out of a bind," the professor said, in his best I-told-you-so voice. It was not until he noticed her ear that he dropped the grin and ran inside.

He had tears in his eyes immediately. Once he could see it was not threatening her well being he stormed out. Karen and Eric followed. Once outside the light hurt their eyes but not enough to stop them from see the professor get in the face of a rather large horse. Eric recognized him.

"See what your kind of antics did to my daughter?! There are better ways, Haden!"

Haden turned and sat on some boulders. "Professor, we just got onto the right foot. Don't go and ruin things now. Karen is fine and she should not have been driving that fast in these parts anyhow. Plus a seatbelt would have prevented that."

A sudden look came over his face and he turned towards Karen. The look of disapproval was plain to see. It always caused a deep crease in his brow to jut out and give him a Klingon-esque forehead. It would be an impressive sight if it were not for the fact the appearance of it was always followed by a stern message. Karen's hand reached up to her head as the stress initiated a headache that could only be compared to the one cause by a basement flooded with sewage on open house day.

The jut in his brow disappeared as soon as he saw Karen was in pain and instead he ran-if you can call a rapid shuffle running-over to her. Now was not the time to go after her for her bad habits. He had her sit down and came to the same conclusion she had already. The ear was lost. He did his best to clean things up and filled her in on the current happenings.

It turns out that Haden was in the situation he was in due to the negligence of the current government. Thanks to this common enemy he and the professor came to an agreement or two. Haden would give them a hand while they were on the lam, and the professor would treat Haden's ill wife. One of the many tools of slavery that were now outlawed was a genetic marker. Without drugs many of the deserters would become dangerously ill just a month or two after they left. It would not kill them but it did render them useless. Constantly sick, their

stomachs would upset with most foods and strenuous activity. Feeling like a drowned rat with no solution would bring back most escapees within the following months. Though some, feeling trapped between two intolerable fates, would kill themselves.

Haden lead them into the house. His wife was in bed and they all sat down for dinner. Karen was starved and did not pay attention to most of the conversation. Eric was extra quiet and was slowly turning green. Halfway through the meal he stopped eating and let loose with a spray. Pea green speckled with corn yellow. Karen clued in immediately. She was avoiding the corn. For some reason it always turned her stomach.

She grabbed a napkin and wiped his mouth. When she touched his lips he pulled back. "Ow! What the hell?"

Karen looked closely and could see a slit forming in his lip and his nose was red and misshapen.

"Eric, I am sorry, but I think you might get your wish soon."

"What's that? To be an animal? I did not wish for that!" His eyes were welling up.

"Nope. To get a date with me! At this rate you'll be a rooboy in couple of weeks, but for now I think we should get you to bed." She gave him a hand out of his seat and Haden gestured to a door down the hall.

Karen came out a few minutes later to the sound of the professor telling Haden about the virus. Haden was intrigued and almost happy with what had happened.

"You guys have got to be kidding me! You're happy with this? I don't think you get it, Dad." She still felt weird calling him that. She still really had no time to come to grips with the situation. "We are the bad guys. Eric could die from that virus. It will not make everyone happy to be animals just cause I love

who I am. I never knew any different. People are going to be angry and some, even on top of those in the government, are going to try and kill us for what we did."

Before the professor could respond, the sound of gunfire outside drew the attention of all away from the angry roogirl. Karen had reacquired her guns at this point and had them pulled into the palm. She was out the window fast, as it was closer. When she hit the ground the area was littered with SWAT. They were not pulling any punches and began to fire on her immediately. Just when she thought her number was up she was tackled to the ground. Haden saved her from a hail of gunfire. She reacted fast and fired back, striking at the unprotected legs. She noticed the legs of some of the cops were digi-grade. Since when did the police hire transformed, she wondered to herself.

Once she was on the attack the enemy for the most part fell fast. Haden was throwing anything and everything he could get his hands on. Cinderblocks, car parts, small trees, it did not matter much. Any which way, when the target was hit they did not get up. He took a few hits himself but did not seem to flinch. His home was riddled with holes, and the place was slowly disappearing into a cloud of dust as flash grenades went off and hand-to-hand combat broke out.

By the end, most of Haden's gang lay dead. Haden was badly injured but worst of all, a stray bullet had struck and killed his wife. He was so angry he busted out the wall to her bedroom and grabbed the first breathing swat officer he could find. He grabbed his helmet and tore it off, only to find a Rottweiler underneath.

"What the hell! We fight our own now! Haden savagely twisted his head and killed the dog in cold blood. Karen was afraid of Haden thereafter. She was tough but she knew he was an animal. Maybe there was a difference between the transformed and her.

"Haden." Came the soothing elderly voice of the professor. "He's not your kind."

"What?" his eyes narrowed on the professor.

"If there is anyone that can spot the transformed, it's me. That, my friend, is a man." The professor knelt beside one of the bodies. He took the helmet off and examined him. There were no tattoos. All transformed species were tattooed before they were changed.

He looked into the eyes and jaw then stood up. He placed his hand on his chin and left for his bag. Karen was speechless and left to take care of Eric. He was unharmed in the firefight, simply because he slept through it. He was becoming very ill, very fast.

The professor took blood but knew what the answers to his test were going to be. It was a human transformed, not unlike Karen.

"I think we should get out of here. Chances are there are more of them not far behind these fellows." Haden had his hand on the professor's shoulder. "So what does it mean, prof?"

"It means the Government was not being honest with me. They have been stealing my work and performing their own human transformation experiments. Sooner or later the virus would have gotten out without my 'help' and ineptness."

"So dad, what you are saying is that the government was doing this to people all this time?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, they are quite good at it, from what I can tell. Getting away just got a lot harder," he gulped. The professor headed for the remains of the house. Karen chased him and grabbed his shoulder.

"So what does this mean for us, though? Are we going to get off the hook?"

"No, Karen. It just means that we are going to be a bigger scapegoat in all this. They will use us to give them the moral

high ground in the eyes of the public. So before it was all about getting away, and now it is all about survival." The professor turned away from her and looked to Haden.

"Haden, anything keeping you here?"

"No," Haden said with certainty.

"Want revenge?"

"Yeah!" he said, with even greater certainty.

"Then let's get moving. We have to get to uncle Marty's place before they do."

"OK." he said, his certainty shifting to worry.

They piled into one of the police wagons with whatever they could carry. Eric slept in the back instead of the professor. None of them really knew what lay ahead for them; everything had changed for them once again and more changes lie ahead.

AMENDS

This is another non-canon story set in the Four Points universe of the Condition: Furry convention.

"Hey Kess, where is my brush? I've been looking for it all morning." Cajun passed over the brush at least two times this morning. The stress of being boss was getting to him at times. On the bright side it seemed that the majority of his plans were coming together. The furs of Four Points and most of the nations of Four Seasons were beginning to fall in line and his only real major thorns were some Frostscar supporters, the occasional democratic insurgencies, and Thadius Effingham.

Kess padded over to the bathroom where Cajun was still looking rather ragged. She picked the brush up from just below where he was looking and handed it to him.

"Y'know these worm holes that keep appearing in our home make it awfully hard to find stuff," Cajun sported a sheepish grin.

"C'mon, the staff meeting is in fifteen minutes and if we leave Frostscar in there with Potoroo too long we are liable to be waist deep in shredded fur."

"Do you think Frost will ever forgive us?"

"I don't know Cajun. He is pretty mad about having to wear the fruit hat in public." Kess giggled. She giggles every time the memory of Frost wearing that dripping sticky chapeau crosses her mind. There were pictures of him in every paper across the nation. There was still a billboard on the east side. It is a fifty-foot reminder of how awful it is to be on the wrong side of the law in these furry lands.

"No, not that. That's just a drop in the bucket. I mean about tossing him out of power. He never really wanted to be in charge anyways. He was forced into the position by the old man. It was making him miserable."

"Well, maybe you should tell him about the last conversation you had with the Commander. That might put him at ease a little. Why haven't you told him about that?"

Cajun put the brush down and Kess adjusted his collar. "I always figured if he just gave up the position the country would see it as a weakness in its government. I did not want the people thinking that we were not prepared when Potoroo assassinated him. It was bad enough that I had to let him off the hook for the assassination. I was surprised when Thadius Effingham did not hammer me over that."

"Well, the people of Four Seasons do have a grand tradition. Since as far back as the books take us, political upheaval has been viewed as progress in government rather then social anarchy. As long as the assassination is involved in revolution, it is viewed similar to an act of war rather then a crime against the state. You yourself did make that speech, "Potoroo is just a soldier for change and we don't punish soldiers, we celebrate them." But most important, you calmed his people and prevented a larger conflict."

Cajun contemplated on telling Frost about the Commanders decision. He eventually figured that was the best idea. He and Kess headed out to the staff meeting. Their massive residence was only a hop, skip and a jump away from the main base. It was amazing. Upon exiting they could see the massive structure. For a country that has not been attacked by the outside world in over two hundred years they had some of the most advanced and terrifying equipment the world has ever seen. I guess you could say that deterrence does work.

Meanwhile, in the board room where the meeting was going to take place, Cola and his helper Madius were preparing the feast. Frostscar sat with Nemet and watched as Nemet fought with his wings. The seats in this room often irritated him because they were just not meant for Bat-wings. The four of them remained silent for the most part. Not one of them wanted to lead on that they just might be in the midst of yet another revolution in the nations capital of Four Points. The tension was building and they were now playing a waiting

game. Just as Cajun had done to Frost, the resistance was prepared to stir up trouble at the up coming celebrations.

They could hear someone at the door. To get in they had to get past Sgt. Surefoot. The group did not know where Surefoot's allegiances lay. He was a soldier that followed orders no matter what the situation. This at least made him predictable. The door opened and it was another recruit, Deramin. He was one of Bob the porcupine's helpers. He was sometimes there to relay messages to Cola when Bob had to have an alibi. He immediately walked over to Cola and whispered to him. All that could be heard from the two was some mutterings from Cola that were too impolite to mention in the presence of the fairer half. Then Deramin left as quickly as he came.

When the door opened, raucous laughter was spewing forth from Potoroo at the door. Sgt. Surefoot was not laughing. That honey badger was all business. Potoroo tried to poke at him and gave up. He walked in before the door had a chance to close. "Hey fellows!"

It was odd, even Frostscar could not resist Potoroo's charm and had to smile back. He was still furious at him but it seemed to be a staple of their relationship. No matter how well they got along they always seemed to be on opposing sides of the fence. "Well, Fuzz Face, I gotta hand it to ya. These plans you have for the Alliance Day celebration are looking pretty sweet. I think they might even top last years appearance of Roxykat."

Just then the door swung open to reveal Tyler giving the sergeant the Buddy Christ. Just as he was about to say hello to everyone Cajun shoved him into the room from behind and the ever-suspicious Kess followed them both in. Cajun walked over and sat in his seat at the head of the table. The table before him was soon covered in a delicious assortment of snacks.

The group was chatting and eating, as was their tradition at these meetings. Cajun stood up as if to make a toast but to everyone's surprise he did not. Instead he turned to Frostscar.

"Frostscar, I owe you the most sincere of apologies. You and I have been friends for too long for me to have kept this from you and our staff. The Commander and I had a meeting before he was killed. He was on his way to meet with us when he was killed. He understood that you did not really want to lead the country after he retired. At least not in the capacity he wanted you to. He was going to inform us of his plan to have the Spirit Drinkers and I take over as the ruling party of Four Seasons. He wanted me to crush Potoroo with extreme force." Cajun looked over at Potoroo.

"It would never have happened," Potoroo chuckled.

Frostscar's stare was intense but Cajun continued.

"I am sorry I put you through that. I am not apologizing for taking over, but for not telling you about this sooner. It may have been easier for us to continue our friendship."

"You've got be kidding me!" Frost was furious. "You put me in jail, Cajun! I was sticky for weeks at a time! Your jail keeper punched me in the balls every day for three weeks! My nuts still hurt!"

"I didn't tell him to do that! You can't seriously think I ordered that?"

"That's not the point. I was in that filthy prison for months and all because you didn't want to tell me about this?" Frostscar stood up and stormed out of the room. Kess began to chase him but Cajun caught her arm before she could.

"Kess, let him go and blow off some steam. He is still not cleared to leave the base so he can't go far." Cajun turned to rest of the staff. "Well, that didn't go according to plan."

The meeting, a bit more somber, continued on with its regular agenda after Frostscar had left. Kess reported that she had a couple of leads on the information leaks but would not divulge what they were until she heard back from some troops out in the field. Cola remained composed and acted disinterested. He took notes when he could but mostly just kept his ears open.

Frostscar stormed out to the grounds, the scene of his removal from office. He was even more bitter than before. While his head was down and he walked he bumped into a large wolf. He had grey over his brow and sported a bucket hat. A cigarette hold hung from his mouth and his yellow glasses covered over his green eyes.

"Oh, excuse me sir," the wolf stated as he turned around to see Frostscar's anger riddled face. "Looks like you've seen better days. Working for the man getting you down?"

"You have no idea. What are you doing here? You're not part of this regime."

"No sir, not me, never. I am just a spectator in these times of rancid oppression. I come and go where I am needed and when I am needed. So what's got you down? I figured by now you would be over all this usurping and stuff?"

Frostscar was not sure shy he was telling the wolf this. It just seemed like he needed to vent and he was the only one there. "Well, I never wanted to run this country before. But once I was tossed from power by my best friend that all changed. It might have been different had I known the truth about things when it happened, but I ended spending all that time in prison and now I just want out."

"Sounds like to me you have lost your direction sir. A government needs to be challenged or it get's lazy. No matter how well run it is if the people aren't angry about something they get complacent and start making mistakes. They'll deregulate so friends can turn a profit and before you know it the whole thing falls apart."

Frostscar raised an eyebrow, "So, what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Exactly what you are doing. Play the game. You have everything you need to take him down already. Your supporters will follow anyone you put in place. More often then not the leader of a country is just a puppet. When he is not he is usually a tyrant. You, my friend, were great leader. You listened to the people and took care of business. You may not have wanted to be a leader but you were, and once you get that feeling it never goes away." Thadius Effingham looked past Frostscar and turned around and began to walk away. Over his shoulder he whispered to Frost., "Remember, if you leave you can no longer see where the government is moving to next."

A paw landed on Frostscar's shoulder as he stood bewildered by the encounter. It was Waji. "Hey Frost, I need you for a photo shoot."

Frostscar nearly told Waji to frag off but considered what the wolf had said. "All right, let's go. Maybe this time you'll get my good side."

"So, who was that?" Waji inquired.

"To be honest I have no idea. But I think he's a good friend."

"Ah, as long as it's not that Thadius fellow. He was reporting from here yesterday and Cajun has just about flipped his lid."

Cola, waited for the last of the staff to leave the room. "Madius, we've got to move. Get a warning to Uzanti and Bob pronto! And don't be followed, we don't know what she knows. If anyone needs to talk to me tell them to hold off until after we find out what she knows. The only contact I want is in concern to what she knows."

Madius rushed out of the room to deliver his message. When the door was closing he could see Sgt. Surefoot smiling. Just before the door came to a close he gave a wink to Cola. The sudden panic was replaced with relief. What ever the badger knew he was certain he would keep it to himself.

If all went according to plan the alliance celebration would have more fireworks then ever. Cola was worried about Kess, but there was not much that could stop him at this point. All he could do now is wait.

The next morning Cajun sat at his desk with the Rogues newspaper before him. His fur was a bit extra red and his fists were balled up.

ALLIANCE CELBRATION OR GIANT HOLE IN OUR NATIONS SECURITY?

Once again I can find my way into the courtyards of our nations most secure complex. How do I do it? That I will not say. But, what I can tell you is that I am not the only one allowed to roam free. Amongst our nations troops the numbers of resistance fighters grows. Within their ranks information about security and details about the plans laid out for the celebration are leaked daily. What does this mean to you? Everything! Anything can happen at the Alliance celebration.

I, Thadius Effingham, am challenging you to be there! To be witness to our glorious commander's actions in times of turmoil! What turmoil might you ask? Our countries financial system lays in ruin at the bottom of the stairs! Pushed down by the incompetence of the administration. How can this be? Our schools and hospitals have never been so well equipped. But neither has our army. It is this relentless recruitment drive that has bankrupt this government.

So, be there in force. If our numbers are so huge that they realize they cannot continue their unmitigated spending perhaps we will break free from this regime and return an illustrious and caring government to power.

Some of you might think I am a little hard on our Commander Cajun. But is this not the man that has taken our government over by force? Not only by force but also from his very own friend? Can we trust him? I think not! It is my job to be critical of any leader that thinks he can run things his way or the highway! No matter how good he is.

Not only will I be there, but I will find a way to report from the very podiums that our fanatical leader speaks from! Catch me if you can, tyrant.

This message is brought to you by your rogue media wolf in sheep's clothing.

THE JOURNALIST

Condition Saga

Cajun stood at the large bay window in his office, his brow furrowed, deep in thought. Even after several months he could still smell the pipe tobacco from the old fox still lingering in the place, not a bad smell but distinct nonetheless. A few recently added baubles and assorted trinkets still rest on the desk from the brief time Frostscar held command. Though distressed by the act of taking command from his long time friend, he was very much saddened that the loss of the friendship had to be one of the consequences. He very much hoped that his transition to power would include his comrade and that their armies would be allied rather than two groups of opposing forces.

Below him, his troops were running marching drills on the parade grounds. It was quite a sight to be seen. He had enlisted several thousand more soldiers and was getting them ready for a grand event showcasing the country's new military might. The borders were still closed and mysteries surrounded the *true* "activities" going on in the capital of this giganti nation. Cajun was preparing them for a bit of a show and tell. He had invited some foreign dignitaries and representatives from other nations to see what has transpired here.

Some folks thought it silly to have such grand displays of military prowess but Cajun insisted. Despite his more than capable leadership, the country was wrought with poor morale and Cajun often felt he was always playing a game of whack-a-mole against Frostscar supporters, who kept popping up in groups now and again. As soon as one group was dealt with, another group would rear its ugly head, causing a constant struggle for peace. Rumours of un-explained disappearances were rampant throughout the nation. Unless someone within Cajun's military was staging these kidnappings without his knowledge, the reports were completely untrue.

Cajun's thoughts returned to the task at hand as he stepped back over to his desk and pressed the call button on his intercom.

"Kamber, would you kindly call in Xaber for me please," the fox asked.

"Certainly, sir," the pony replied.

Cajun needed a way to show the people that he had their best interests in mind, to prove to them that he and the rest of the Spirit Drinkers were still, after all these years, the rightful rulers of this nation and more than capable of keeping its borders safe.

Xaber came in looking a bit disheveled; his uniform did not have it usual crispness. Cajun could tell that something was amiss, as Xaber was a major supporter of Cajun's efforts to attain office and had become a trusted member of his staff who wore this title with dignity. Normally, the soldier standing before him wouldn't have borne the disgrace of an imperfect uniform.

"What can I do for you sir?" the smaller fox said.

"I want you to apply medical benefits to all citizens by next week, that's an order." Cajun spoke, with a commanding tone.

"But sir... they already *have* medical benefits," he said, looking perplexed.

Cajun glared down at him, "At the same grade as our enlisted men?"

Xaber stance waivered, as if he was unable to support the burden placed upon him. "Sir, two weeks ago you had me order our forces to start construction on several new military upgrades. Just last week, you had me approve several new programs within the education system, now this? I can't do it."

"Oh? Care to explain this to me? Do choose your words carefully." Cajun's gaze glowered.

"We just don't have the funds, sir. The coffers are nearly bare, all these social programs you've started are stretching our budget too thin, we simply cannot support a military this size.

"We are the government, Xaber. Print more money." Cajun was clearly displeased.

"It's not quite that easy sir." Xaber replied, sheepishly.

"Really Xaber, don't you think I know that?" Losing patience, Cajun quickly stood from his chair, walking to the window again. "I understand the situation, but this is what needs to be done to keep these fickle people happy." He turned back to Xaber, letting out a sigh as he realized the tone of his voice seems to have shaken the smaller fox. "Xaber," Cajun says, resting a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder, "understand that I am not upset with you, you have done everything I have asked, and I have asked a lot. These are trying times for everyone. Give me a bit of time to think and I will get you some more money soon," doing his best to smile. "Go home and rest, you are dismissed."

Xaber stood up and saluted, quickly leaving the office, grateful for his brief reprieve. Clearly Xaber was not the only one with weight on his shoulders these days.

Cajun poured himself a drink from a decanter sitting on a side table. The fox composed himself as he walked out his door and sat on the edge of Kamber's desk.

"Kamber, would you kindly ring Tyler and have him escort Frostscar up to my office." Taking a sip from his glass.

"Certainly, are you planning another public humiliation, sir?" she said gleefully.

"No Kamber, I just wanna talk with him for a bit." He pauses and grins, "Maybe later though"

"Will do, sir," she nodded sharply as she picked up the phone.

The door to Frost's small cell swung open and banged loudly as it stopped, "Rise and Shine cupcake!" shouted Kess, Cajun's highest ranking security and intelligence officer. Tyler, a tall human and her only other superior, was standing behind her, a look on his face that hinted that his presence was not so much to ensure the job was done right, as much as he was there out of amusement in seeing Frost's predicament.

Frostscar was standing at the window, "I'm not known to look out the window while sleeping."

Kess was quick to respond, "More remarks like that and I'll be happy to toss you in one of the cells without windows. We do have those you know."

"Yeah, I know. I was there when we finished building them." Frost had a few teeth showing on the left side. He would constantly waffle between irate and depressed. Today's menu said irate."

Kess quickly stepped forward, grabbing Frost by the collar of his shirt with one hand, the other feigning a strike, causing Frost to flinch and close his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he could see the gryphon returning the sarcastically smug look he had given her. Knowing she'd proved her point, she released his shirt. No sooner had Frost started to compose himself again, when a blow administered by Tyler struck him instead. The human smirked as the Fox crumpled to the floor. It was clear that the man took immense pleasure in this, made obvious by the twisted grin on Tyler's face.

Frost wiped his cheek, as if it would clear the pain away, "What does *our beloved leader* need of me?" sarcasm hanging

thick in the air as Frost crossed his arms behind his back and turned.

Kamber stood up and gave a wink to Frost as he came in. "Hey fuzzface, how are ya today?" She said in her usual cheeriness, regardless of the situation.

The door to Cajun's office swung open. "Kamber, quit fraternizing with the prisoner. Bring him in."

Kamber closed the door behind them as Cajun strolled to the window with his hand on his chin. "Well Frost, I have to congratulate you. While I may have won over most of the people, still many of these folks, in their limited capacity, love the way things were. It does not seem to matter how good I am to them. They don't want to play ball with our new government."

"That's because they know that no matter how many treats you toss a dog, you still keep it on a leash in it's own yard." The contempt in Frost's voice was palpable.

Cajun was having a difficult time remaining composed. Frost knew exactly how to push his buttons, and given the stress he was under, it was only a matter of time before his cards were laid out on the table.

"Frost I don't think you get it. If these folks don't start to come over to my side of thinking I am going to have to make an example out of someone, that someone being you. Right now there's a group of folks that think your administration will come back and save them from me. They're calling me a tyrant."

"You are a tyrant."

"How can you say that? We have been friends almost all our lives!" Cajun could barely contain himself but was remaining calm. He would not lose this battle of wits with Frost.

"Yeah, and look where that landed me! I am in jail, being threatened by your two-bit thugs. I'm covered in bumps and bruises from all of these regularly scheduled beatings and when I am allowed out, it's so children can throw fruit at me."

"You know full well that I did not approve of those beatings. Besides, the kids love it! It's good exercise!" Cajun sat on his desk, a grin on his face as he felt the conversation slipping back into his favour. "Still, what confuses me is why some folks are staying blindly loyal to you. What was it that made them listen to your half baked ideas and what makes them continue to support you despite your obvious failure to hold a regime?"

The artic fox remained silent.

Cajun sighed, "If you don't have an answer, you will be made an example of, and I really don't want to go down that road." He paused for a moment, waiting for any response from Frost before continuing. "I just wish you would come to your senses and see that I am doing this for the good of the country."

Frost snapped his head towards Cajun, staring back at him, "Once again you have completely overwhelmed me with your bullshit, Cajun,." Frost said nearing infuriation. "You constantly say it's for the good of the country but what you mean is it's for the good of the Spirit Drinkers. I hoped you would come to your senses as you have asked of me, but now that you have signed these treaties with the Feral Extremists, I know you are just as big of a gas bag as the old man ever was. So execute me if you must, but I will not help you. This land of ours deserves real and true freedom. Not your twisted vision."

Cajun slammed a fist on his desk, "That must be so easy for you to say, you still think you're the hero of this story don't you? Tell me, what did you have to do to become leader? What did you have to sacrifice? What did you do to earn this seat of power and everything that came with it?" He paused for a moment, grabbing a random trinket left on the desk, motioning with it to the former leader. The questions were hypothetical, as before Frost had a chance to respond Cajun smashed the item on the ground in anger "Nothing!" he shouted, eyes wide with anger "It was all given to you, power, fame, respect, everything, while I had to fight for it!"

Frostscar looked up, a smirk of near disbelief on his face, "You keep talking like you had no other choice, if I was doing such a bad job, had the thought ever crossed your mind to simply help me?"

Cajun snapped back "We did help! Myself *and* our staff. *MY* Staff, had to blindly follow your word, hoping that some of the old man's abilities had somehow seeped into that thick head of yours. The cook would have made a better leader than you!"

"If you really are so concerned with the well being of these people, then put the cook in charge! I'm sure Cola would love to run things." The artic fox once again played on Cajun's anger "After all, an army marches on it's stomach." He smirked, the feeling of defiance once again boiling inside him.

"Ha!" The red fox shouted in a sarcastic laugh. "He'd need a lot of help to pry this leadership out of my claws.." Cajun turned to the window and blinked in realisation; his thoughts taking in everything for a moment, the power, his position, his actions, finally a shred of doubt taking a moment to linger in his mind before shaking his head to clear it away and get back to the task at hand.

Frost simply chuckled, perhaps seeing some of this, perhaps knowing that he'd bought himself some time for now. Both foxes had now calmed down significantly.

"I will not execute you." Cajun said firmly. "I never would and you know this." The fox looked to frost, anger mixed with sadness could be seen in his eyes. "We were friends once, that must have meant something."

Frost leans back in his seat, "How quickly becoming leader can change things eh?"

Cajun sighed again heavily, "Lead me, follow me, or get out of my way.. and you my friend, have already shown your contempt for the first two." Cajun said, rubbing his chin for a moment until a small grin started to form on his face "Still, if I can't get rid of you, perhaps you can be of some.. other use.."

Frost's eyes looked about as his brow furrowed, being defiant in the face of death was one thing, but Cajun's words had clearly made him uneasy.

"Tyler, would you kindly get this fleabag back to his cell." Tyler, who had been silently watching the whole ordeal from the back of the room nodded, and pulled Frost by the arm to take him back to the holding block.

As soon as Tyler left, Cajun let out a heavy sigh, before picking up the phone. "Strype, yeah it's Cajun. Spread the word: an example shall be made of our dear friend at the gala." He paused for a moment, listening to Strype before continuing, "Yes, that's right, he still won't cooperate. We shall put him to work during the event and at the end of the gala we'll have a special surprise for him, perhaps a painful and humiliating surprise, I'll leave those details up to you."

Cajun hung up the phone. He was still distraught, having no one left to make face to he made this visible, shaking a bit and closing his eyes for a moment. He poured himself another

HOWL AS ONE

MIKE VOÛTE

"LoooooOST!" Jerremy wailed. Like a wolf, he howled up into the emptiness, "LooooST! Oh, help me, I don't know the way..."

This was no dream- Jerremy knew that now. Perhaps it'd been a stroke deep in the night; now he was swimming through that famed 'tunnel of light'. Well, people always said that happened. But he'd never been prepared for the passing of *time*. He couldn't even imagine how long he'd been here...

Where were those Gates of Heaven? He wasn't supposed to be stuck in this ethereal world of featureless white. *There was no REASON to be here!*

"I'M LOST!" he cried again in desperation. Only echos and whispers returned from the cold, bleak expanse around him.

A man's whitened form spun by, arms flailing. "Please, Jerremy beseached,"can you help me? Sir?" But none of the others with him here *ever* acknowledged his presence- too panic stricken to notice another lost soul. This man's face only registered shock and fear.

Look for something to hold onto, he told himself. There must be a way out of here, if only he could keep from drifting in the strange currents that carried everyone in endless spirals. *Nothing!*

Occasionally another soul would bump into him; a grip like steel held him against the other for a few seconds and then, like melted butter, the other's hands would flow through his form and the two were wedged apart. *Looooooost!*

And then, the wail came again-- the one he'd heard several times already-- the one that seemed to come from everywhere at once. "Aooooooooo! Whaooooooooo!" It seemed to

answer his cries sometimes, but it never made any sense!! "Wheeennn..."

Who? As in *who* he was?? And, when? As in how long he'd been here? *When*- when he got here? The whispering call could merely be some echo of his own cry, but it sounded far more like a canine howl. In fact, that was exactly what his dog had done that night- the night before... he died.

Jess-the-Shepard... his companion. His love. How she must keen for him now. Would she be crying in the night in some cold dog pound? Jerremy sickened at the thought.

Jess had been howling that evening. Had she known? That night of the meteor--the YU55 meteor--which had almost struck the Earth that November afternoon? Jerremy knew it'd passed closer than the moon's orbit, right by the light of Jupiter's bright disk and not far from where the moon shone dimly in the waning light. It could have been the famed 2012 end of the world...

"Waaaoooooo!" *There was that howl again!* "Whhheeeennnnn?" When. Then? When the meteor passed?

And that was it, wasn't it?? The celestial picture formed in his mind's eye exactly as it'd been that very evening. One was completely *lost* if they hadn't a clear picture in their mind of *when* they'd lived. And the only way to do that was to remember the night sky of at least one night of their lives. It was something ancient man knew for millenia- something modern man never looked for anymore.

"And so..." a power seemed to flow around him. The voice enveloped him; embraced him. Jerremy felt suddenly warm and happy. "Do you wish to go back?? Your friend has vouched for you..."

My friend??

"Of course. The one whose spirit you share... the one in who's image you played.

Jess! It ws true; Jerremy *did* imagine himself a dog sometimes. His costume hung in plain sight on a rack in his bedroom; a silver wolf, lined with yellow-gold markings. How often had he and yes, even Jess, wished they were each other?

Jess is calling to me? Helping me?

"She is..."

Go back. Back to himself?? *Was that possible??*

"Many have no knowledge from when or where they came," the voice continued. "You do. Many have no voice to call them back. The spirit that calls you gives me such love and joy... farewell, Jerremy."

Jerremy blinked once and the world went black. He was choking- coughing. He fought for a deep breath that burned in his lungs. Once more, the wet slab of tongue lashed his mouth and a "YIP" sounded sharply to his ears. Upright in bed now, Jerremy coughed some more and shook the sleep from his head.

Alive. Whatever nightmare he'd woke from had left him in sweat and seeing stars. He must have cut off his breath somehow in the night! And Jess' tongue had woken him! *Good GIRL!!* Jess' tail slapped the wall beside them a few times at the pat on the head. *Good Girl!*

The rest was as fuzzy as Jess' beautiful, soft ears.

THE PLAN

This story was written for Xaber, as part of his winning bid at the Condition: Red 2011 Ladder Auction. Xaber, in a crazy bidding war with Chazore, won the last copy of my first book, a story commission, the right to appear on the cover of this book, as well as a copy of the cover art.

As the water dripped deeper into the depths of his underwear he was reminded of the cold cruel fate occasionally imparted on cubs in snowy climates. His walk home from school was treacherous enough without the occasional onslaught of slush balls created by a mix of spring weather and cubs of a dubious nature. He would usually use the mass of grey matter he sported between his ears to thwart his adversaries in the end, but the walk home would still be cold and damp, as it is now.

When he came ashore he was nice and dry. He abandoned any extra weight he had in favour of not having to lug it all with him as he made his way to the interior of the island. The host government strictly prohibited entering these lands and those caught were on occasion sent home in crates. The island was massive and his journey was long enough without the rain. He could only hope that his investigation into the geography of these uncharted lands was accurate enough and he'd be in civilization soon.

Sure enough, after a few hours he was beginning to see and smell signs of civilization. There was a scent in the air, one of industry. This land was rich and his for the taking. No outside money or influence had ever stepped into this land, but Xaber was going to change this. And by the time they figured out he was not from the island it would be too late. Besides, he would be good for this land's economy. It would not be the first time he'd helped a growing nation. As a matter of fact, this would be the at least the fifth time he would make a land's economic dreams come true.

Many folks that knew Xaber thought of him primarily as a businessman and philanthropist. Nearly all of them were right, in one way or another. His interests were not solely on money but on the burgeoning growth of nations. With him gaining a foothold here he would be able to introduce new technologies and begin studies in unknown medicines and technologies.

Sure, it would help the continued growth of his empire, but he felt that the impact was more important then his own well being. That being said he was already very well off.

The scent of civilization grew stronger but it wasn't what it initially seemed. As Xaber peered through the trees he could see men training in the distance. Not soldiers, but rebels instead. His heart leapt. A country already in the throes of change was more then he could have dreamed of. Of course, this made the challenge that much more dangerous-but with the risk came great rewards. Influence of a political nature was far easier to execute then just rocking the financial boat.

His next step would be to reveal himself to the rebels and hope that he was welcomed rather then destroyed. To help with his decision-making in the near future he watched and waited to see if he could discover the motivations behind this camp.

After a few hours of watching it was clear to him that the camp was a group working for political change and not dominance of the country. To Xaber, this was a good thing. He observed the patrols and figured he should be getting caught in the next few minutes so he prepared. He buried some stuff a little farther off from his location and hoped his nose was a bit better than theirs so he could find it without them getting to it first.

Sure enough two guards on their rounds stumbled across him and took him into custody. He was not manhandled or beaten but taken to their leader promptly. This was also a good sign. It meant that the furs here were not as Feral as their banner was leading the world to believe.

"So, sir of the woods to the east, what's your business here?" The large pink mohawked Roogoyle asked him. Business itself was the real answer and Xaber almost let out a snicker but instead kept his cool.

"I heard you guys out here and was wondering what's the deal, that's all," he said in a sheepish tone.

"Do you really think that I believe that you have no idea who or what we are?"

"Uhm, to be honest sir, I don't," Xaber hoped that an ego hid under the pink hair. He was wrong but lucky.

"Hmmmm, if this is true we better come up with a bigger and better plan to get the attention of the commander. Seriously, somebody get me a venue to announce that we mean business!"

Just what Xaber wanted to hear. The group was relatively new so guiding them slightly in his direction would not be out of the question. "What exactly is it you are fighting for?"

"Well, most of all, it's democracy. But I'd be happy with a little territory that we could live in without the government sticking their snouts into our business. We just wanna have a few parties and relax without the threat of the government hammering us every time we disagree with their 'due process.' It's ridiculous, really. Just last week we had some guys try to perform some tunes for some local school kids. AND FOR THAT THEY WERE JAILED!" He pounded his fist hard on the table. He then tossed the keys to Xabers handcuffs to him. "I have a hunch that you are not the threat here. If you want to stick around and join us go and get branded , we'll give you three squares and place to stay in exchange for service."

"Perfect."

"That's what I say. Now go and sorry about the branding but it really does keep out the riff raff." Potoroo turned and walked out of the room seemingly without a care in the world.

Xaber's next step would be to learn the lay of the land from some of the other rookies in the group. If he could figure a way to get the group noticed, it would definitely be in a position of use to this group and maybe even the powers in charge. Playing both side was dangerous, but the best way to really get his influence where it was needed.

A few weeks went by and his feelings for this group were decidedly forming into some good strong bonds. They were a group of well-meaning and insightful characters. He was very much liking where this was going. Drifting off to sleep one night, he found himself hoping that whatever the results of his escapades were, this group would be well taken care of.

The schoolyard was all but empty. His fur was warm from the sun and the teachers were calling him in for class. He was bewildered by the feeling that he had seen all this before.

His approach to the school seemed to take an eternity. His legs ached and when he got there the doors were locked. He pulled hard and inside he could see the other kids playing and occasionally pointing towards the door and joking. He let go and sat down. Next to him was Ferris, his grade school chum.

"You know why they don't like you,right?"

"Huh? They don't?" Xaber was hurt.

"They are bothered because of your success."

"But I do it all for them."

"I know. But maybe if you were a bit meaner and not such a nice guy they could see that you're just another kid. But when you're a nice guy for some reason people want to step on you."

"But I don't want to be mean."

Xaber woke up in a sweat. He did not remember the dream but had a sad feeling deep in his chest. Erroche looked over at him and saw something was wrong. The larger then life wolf came and sat next to him.

"What's up, Pup?" he punched him in the shoulder. "Training isn't getting to you, is it?"

"No, just have this weird sensation that something ain't right this morning. You ever wonder if what you're doing is the right thing?"

"Everyday." He looked down and shuffled his paws in the dirt beside the bunk. "I don't want anyone to get hurt in all this. I can't bring myself to actually shoot at someone but I fear it might come to that someday. If the revolution could move on without the threat of any real violence I'd be a pretty happy wolf. Potoroo feels the same way. But he is so insane sometimes it's hard to tell."

"You mean he's not a violent lunatic? He's just a regular lunatic?"

"No, don't get me wrong-he's not actually crazy. He's the nicest guy you'd want to hang out with at any given moment. But he knows better than to let anyone know that. Nice guys finish last, y'know."

"Hey, thanks, man. I think you just gave me an idea." Xaber leapt up and headed for Potoroo's tent. He was abuzz with excitement. If what Erroche had said about Potoroo was true, he had a perfect plan to kickstart the revolution. A few years ago he'd acquired a massive offshore insurance company. It would be no issue at all for him to sign up all these men and prepare for a massive hoax.

"Halt!" The guard at the door stopped him dead in his tracks. "What's your business?"

"Success for the revolution! Now let me in!" Xaber was too excited for the formalities at hand.

"Geez man, you don't need to be so pushy." The atmosphere was actually kind of relaxed, and the guard, for the most part, was just being funny.

When Xaber got into the tent, the look on Potoroo's face let him know that he heard the exchange outside.

"I have an answer for you."

"What the hell does that mean?" Potoroo was very confused.

"You are basically a terrorist organization to this government, so be one!"

"You're fucking nuts, aren't you? I don't want to kill anyone. It's far funnier if we draw dongs on the great commander's pictures all over the island."

"That's good and all, but how would you like to garner more attention in five minutes then you will in the next five years? You'll make a heaping pile of money and no one gets hurt."

"I'd love to. But to be honest, I still think you're nuts."

Xaber began to pace. He looked hard at Potoroo, and the next moment could make or break the deal.

"Potoroo, I'm not from the island. I'm an outside investor. I can get insurance on all your troops and then set up a tragedy the will mobilize this island nation into civil unrest that can bring your ideals to the surface."

Potoroo was blown away. He had never even met someone from offshore, let alone had them in this very camp. How could this even be happening?

"It still sounds to me like your nuts, but now I am listening."

"Here's the plan." Xaber and Potoroo spoke in private late into the night. By the end of it all Potoroo was as excited as Xaber about the idea. It would indeed achieve what he needed to, but to an effect far greater than anything he had conceived on his own.

The very next morning Xaber began signing the Ferals up for life insurance with his offshore company. This provided him with a massive boost in business on the books, even though it would result in a loss. Of course, in the long run the overall effect would be a net gain. Potoroo and Xaber kept the overall plan a secret. The walls in these places had ears of their own. With the technology sported by the opposition it seemed

every time a tent flap opened it was filled with rumours of an information leak.

In less then a month Xaber had two large buildings in the core of the capitol rented out in their entirety for a convention. The guests were registered and all of them insured. The only souls that would be in that building were the cleaning staff. So when the day came Potoroo, Xaber and Erroche lead a team to the capitol.

It was early in the evening, and after a few events that the Ferals perpetuated in a southern province, security was a bit tired and stretched out. Once inside the buildings two teams split up and began to gather the maintenance staff. The amount of explosives was carefully calculated and prepped. Once the staff was out the teams left and sat up on a ridge not from the site. This evening would be a game of Guy Fox. It would not be the parliament building blown up this time, but instead this country's confidence. And from the ashes Xaber would step out to help rebuild it.

Potoroo and Xaber shook hands. Xaber returned to the camp and dug up his bag and briefcase. Next time he saw Potoroo they would be on opposite sides of the desk.

It was less then a week after the building went down. The country's glorious leader was killed in a rocket attack, and the people of this land were shaken. But simultaneously, they were happy with the new commander's performance. The only issue they really had was money. The social programs put in place by the burgeoning democratic government were taking their toll on the coffers of this great land. The commander spent much of his time at his desk developing grey fur and lines in his muzzle.

"BZZZZZZZZ" The static sound of the intercom startled him slightly. "Commander? I have a gentleman here that says he has what you need."

He snickered a bit. Every two-bit business man on the island had been in there trying to coax him into taking a public sector loan. It was, for the most part, just re-enforcing his ideal of Communistic rule.

"Send him in." He loaded the gun he kept in his drawer. He was tired of the scam artists and maybe he would make an example of this one. Little did he know this one was not from this island. And his gun, it would remain cold.

Xaber stepped into the door. He was dressed like a winning James Bond impersonator. The commander was a bit taken back by his appearance and confidence. His fur was well groomed and his demeanor was calm and steady. He placed a rather large briefcase on his desk and turned it to face the leader of this land.

Xaber sat down, "Well? Aren't you going to open it?

The commander leaned forward. He was certain it was safe. His nose told him so. He popped the clasps and opened the case. It was filled with gold. More than the country has in all its lands. He knew this came from off the island, which meant the man before him may have as well.

"For a position in your staff you may have this. Additionally, I will help your island prosper unlike any time before this." Xaber said with a straight face.

The commander stood up and looked out over the courtyard. Troops were running drills and soaking up the much-needed funds to take care of the people. Perhaps this was the time to let someone in. Why shouldn't it be an investor rather than a leech?

"What shall my people call my new secretary of economic reform?"

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